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OF ROMANCE AND SUSPENSE
BY S. J. TREIBICH

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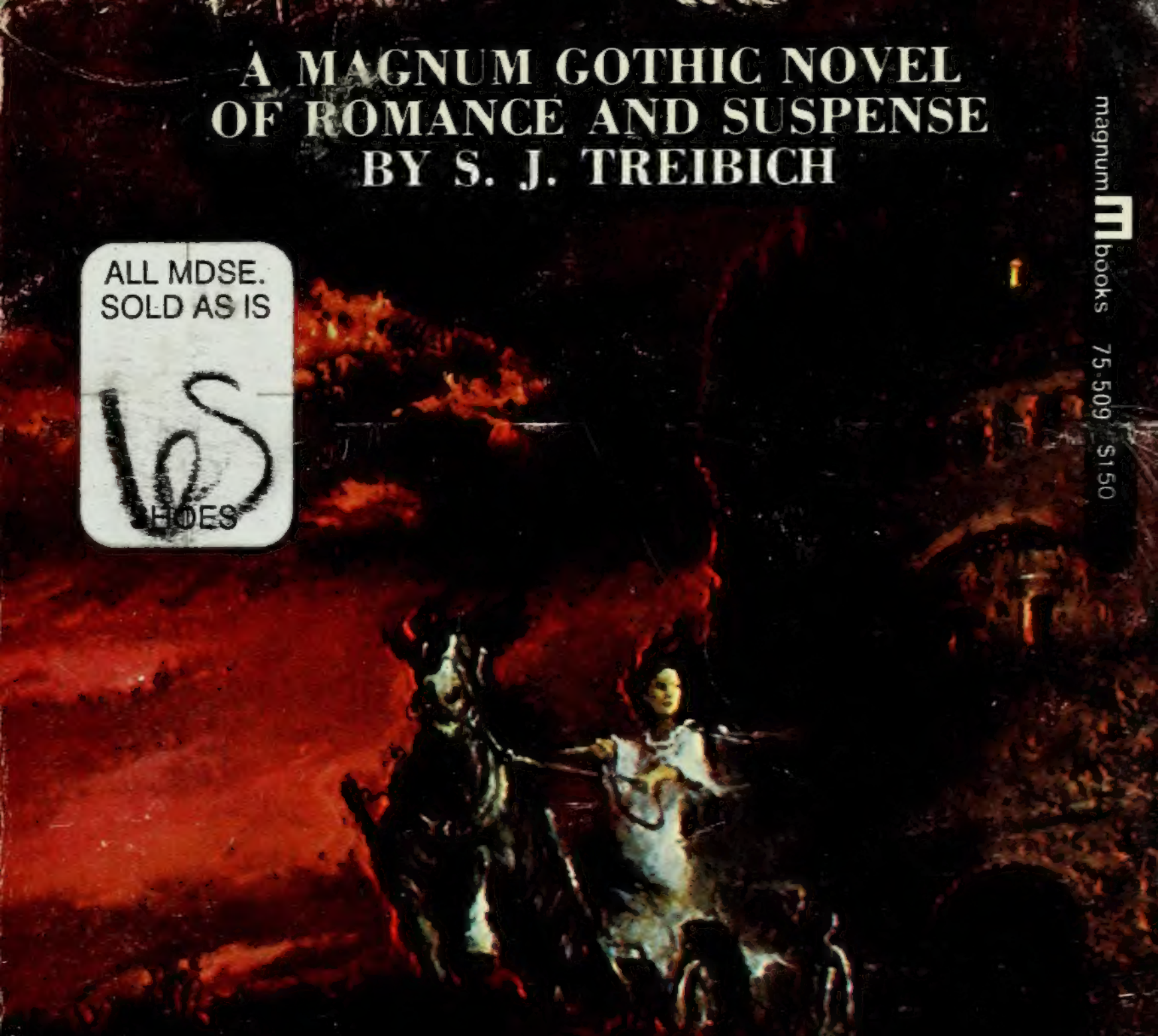

HAELSTROM MANOR

A ride in a darkened coach carried Beth into a world of uncertainty — and terror!

EASY EYE

Mary S.

THE ROAR OF TERROR

It was my first night in the huge, echoing dark hulk of Haelstrom Manor. I was exhausted, but my mind was so full of wonder and confusion that I thought I'd never sleep . . .

But I did sleep, finally, and when I awoke the room was absolutely dark. What could have awakened me? Suddenly I noticed that the window was open and the heavy frame was knocking against the stone wall with a hollow sound that terrified me. I knew that the window had been firmly locked when I went to sleep . . .

I managed to get up, light a candle, and stumble to the window. I stood before the gaping frame and looked down at the sharp rocks that reared out of the foaming sea. They were so far below that for an instant I felt dizzy . . .

Suddenly, without warning, I felt two hands grip my shoulders, and I was thrown headlong toward the beckoning void!

PUT PLEASURE IN YOUR READING
Larger type makes the difference
This EASY EYE Edition is set in large, clear type—at least 30 percent larger than usual. It is printed on non-glare paper for better contrast and less eye-strain.

HAELSTROM MANOR

S. J. TREIBICH

MAGNUM EASY EYE EDITIONS

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HAELSTROM MANOR

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Chapter One

It was raining fitfully. The turbid water ran into ill-formed rivulets on the spongy clay as the iron-studded wheels of the somber carriage turned over and over in the uncobbled road. There was no wind, no cleansing breath to blow away the miasma of decay that had settled under the steaming fog, and the horses, sensing this, shivered and whinnied, their plaintive voices echoing amongst the denuded birches. All life seemed to be hibernating outside the carriage's dank shroud. The only sounds that penetrated the darkened interior were the incessant rhythmic clip-clops of the rounded studs striking against the loose flint chips in the roadbed. The chill winter sun was striving desperately to proclaim its rebirth in the eastern sky, but the tendrils of the covert night still held it in thrall. Morning would soon come, and with it, the strange ritual of an eerie interment. Five souls would go out before the breaking of the morn, but only four would return along this weary path. These were her wishes.

"Cheer up, Beth. You'll not be wanting her to grieve for your tender heart now, would you, lass? You canna know where she abides now, but you dinna want to fret her." Doctor Andrews' burr was as natural now as the day he'd swallowed his last dram in the fair Scottish hills and left for the wasted rock of our Vermont mountains.

He was a kindly man—I'd known this since my childhood—but seldom given to sentiment, and the warm attention in his otherwise craggy voice helped soothe the gnawing beasts of my imagination. He had known my aunt for half a century and, I believe, loved her deeply. I tried to lighten my mood, but half-heartedly at best, and his keen eyes appealed to me sadly for control. "Hold tight, lass, it canna be much longer."

"I shall try, doctor. I shall most certainly try, but I'm afraid my heart will not be in it." I spoke quickly, hoping the declared promise would spur me to greater effort. As I looked about me in the coach I could sense the grief shared by my fellow passengers, though I was not yet certain as to its cause. The doctor, I knew, had been deeply enmeshed in my poor aunt's last illness as well as in her active life, but what connection the others had had with her was a mystery they did not, from their silence, wish to reveal. I tried to borrow strength from the doctor's few words and granite features, but with each creak of the laboring wheels, my thoughts returned to Aunt Alicia. She was dead. When the sun broke into the heavens, I would lose all trace of her.

For that was the goal of this bizarre cavalcade.

In accordance with my aunt's last wishes as specified in her cryptic testament, there was no coachman seated on the box of our black-lacquered carriage. The two harnessed stallions were given full rein to choose their own path until sunrise. We had been traveling in this fashion since midnight, not knowing how far, for the inky muslin curtains were drawn. And we were ignorant of our eventual destination. Our tortuous circuit of the bleak, barren foothills had become a nightmare of uncertainty. With each lurch of the complaining carriage, my heart fluttered. My imagination dredged up grisly spec-

tacles of the team losing its footing and plunging over one of the everpresent precipices. I could sense the others' unremitting anxiety, too, but I kept my premonitions to myself, not wanting to appear an addle-witted child. Aunt Alicia had requested this strange itinerary for reasons of her own, and I could do no less than acquiesce to her memory. Nevertheless, I found myself fervently praying for the sunrise that would bring us to a halt. I was so involved in my reverie that I did not, at first, hear the soft words directed at me by Mr. Simms, of Wadsward, Peaning and Simms, Solicitors, my aunt's attorneys.

"Ah hem . . . Miss Elizabeth, it is now precisely five-eighteen, sunrise in this locale, and I would suggest that we stop, if that meets with your approval." He waited for my miserable nod, then signaled to the oddly disfigured man next to him. In one fluid yet, I realized, constrained motion, the stranger opened the door and, grasping the baggage rack in his immense hand, swung onto the box and brought the team to a gently rocking stop. I hadn't heard him utter a sound throughout the entire trip, but as Dr. Andrews helped me dismount onto the uneven ground, I heard him crooning to the horses to soothe their skittishness. His tone belied his rough exterior; there was more than a trace of gentle breeding in his manner. This enigmatic man was the fourth passenger on our odyssey, and the one I knew the least about. His unusual demeanor might have intrigued me far more, but at that moment the sun rose behind the defiant peaks and I stared at the suddenly familiar landscape illuminated before my incredulous eyes. My mind blocked. I did not dare speak. Whether by chance or design, I knew not which, we were not fifty yards from our starting point. We were home.

"You dinna now ken the purpose of our strange wan-

derings, but you will, Beth; aye you will indeed. I canna explain as yet, but I want you to know that you're a braugh lass and your dear aunt knew it."

I tried to comprehend the meaning hidden in the good doctor's strange words, but my swirling feelings of relief, puzzlement, then anger, gave me no chance to decipher it. I knew only that for over five hours we had been conveyed in a wearisome circle. Five terror-laden hours had advanced the carriage a space that I could have ambled in five minutes, even in the pitch dark of night. I turned to Dr. Andrews, a storm beginning to brew on my face, for it was obvious to me that he was at least partly responsible for the cruel deception.

"Dr. Andrews, I should like some explanation of this extraordinary charade. If it were your intention to frighten me severely, then you can pride yourself on an eminently successful venture. But I cannot believe that was your purpose. Or am I mistaken?" I fought to control my wrath. It wasn't fair of me to abuse an old friend. But a note of sarcasm crept into my speech and I saw the kindly old man wince. Anger gave way to remorse. I tried to retract my former ill manners by placing my hand about his aging shoulders.

"I am sorry, doctor; that was not at all called for," I conceded, "but the sorrowful events of these past hours have unnerved me somewhat. Will you accept my sincere apology?"

"Ach lass, it is I that should ask your forgiveness. You dinna have to fret about an old fool's feelings." Yet, after my apology, I could see the heavy weight of the remorseless years roll off his bent shoulders and the fiery Scotsman's eyes rekindled. I felt relieved and comforted. Whatever his reasons for the hoax, it had been planned not to hurt, but to help. I knew instinctively that a man

like Dr. Andrews, who had spent the better portion of his life in service to others, was beyond petty dramatics. There had, then, to be some *transcendental* reason for this whole affair. The others had all known that we would return to this very spot, and yet I was certain their concern had been genuine. Why had they been so mortally afraid in the swaying coach? Why? Because although they'd known our intended destination, the danger had been real.

"Mr. Torder, will you kindly see to the—ah hem—the arrangements? I have a matter or two to discuss with Miss Elizabeth and the doctor, after which we will join you. Is that satisfactory?"

The question was purely rhetorical and was accepted as such by Mr. Torder, who left our company and walked purposefully towards the rear of the coach. His stride and ramrod posture were highly reminiscent of the tintype soldiers which had so often thrilled me on the Fourth of July parades through our town square, but I perceived that there was more to this man than was readily apparent. Mr. Torder was patently used to issuing commands, and yet he had acceded to Mr. Simms' authority without question. I wondered why.

Mr. Simms seemed extremely distressed. His eyes darted to every shadow as if pursued, his self-assurance waning with each rattle of the coach's protesting springs. His discomfort communicated itself to me—I shivered involuntarily. "Miss Elizabeth—Beth, if I may—I want you to know that I share your grief. Your aunt was far more to me than merely a client; she was a close friend and I shall miss her. I don't want to burden you with my own sorrows. I only want you to know that our night-long journey was in strict accordance with your aunt's expressed wishes. You must have many questions, but like

the doctor, I must also request your indulgence. You will be given the answers, but not right now and not by me. I know how cold that may seem to you and I am sorry that I must take this tack, but, in all conscience, I am obligated to follow my instructions to the letter. Now—"

"Are you trying to tell me that you are not going to explain your part in this . . . farce?" My voice rose in anger.

"Not at this time. No."

"But what right have you to terrorize me and then blatantly state that you're not going to explain? It's not fair . . . it's . . . it's immoral!"

"Beth! You dinna know what you're saying. Mr. Simms here does not deserve the sharp side of your tongue. You're not a spiteful child and I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head. It's been a menacing night, I'll grant you, but we've shared the danger and only you will claim the reward." I stood transfixed as I watched the doctor's transformation from the gentle practitioner to the righteous disciplinarian. He was right. I *had* taken my frustrations out on Mr. Simms. But what did he mean by *reward* and why was Mr. Simms so panicky? What secret was being screened by all this clandestine melodrama? My thoughts seemed to race around a cave of confusion, zealously seeking an entrance to the answer, but the sudden reappearance of Mr. Torder upset my agile pace. He stared at us a moment, his deep-set eyes appraising the prevailing tension, and then spoke.

"Alicia is waiting."

Chapter Two

"Alicia is waiting." The words echoed through my thoughts, but their meaning eluded me. Waiting? Waiting for whom? She wouldn't wait; she detested it thoroughly. I could still remember her intense lectures on the moral responsibility of being punctual and, for the moment, she returned to me.

"*Elizabeth, you're late.*"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Alicia, but I was so involved in my reading that I quite forgot the time."

"*Time is precious. Perhaps one day you'll understand that and realize that it is as valuable to me as it is to you. You've every right to squander your sands, but not mine. I dislike having to harp on this subject, but I'd be remiss in my duty if I didn't. I detest waiting, Beth, so please don't disappoint me again.*" She was disappointed, yes, but most of all she was irritated by my disregard for her stern dictates. She had tried so often to instill in me her own strict values. My failure to live up to them hurt her deeply.

"Please, Aunt Alicia, please don't be angry with me. I do understand and I'm truly sorry. I didn't mean to keep you waiting."

"Beth! Elizabeth, is anything the matter? Are you ill?" Dr. Andrew's voice seemed to be coming from far

away and sounded as if it were wrapped in gauze. What was he talking about? Why should I be ill? I was only apologizing to Aunt Alicia. Alicia!

"Beth, child, she's gone and you canna bring her back. Do you understand what I'm saying, Beth? Let go; let her rest. She deserves that now. She's dead and gone, Beth." Affectionately, he tried to soothe me, but the past seemed to be infinitely less threatening than the present and I retreated into its enfolding arms. For a few dear minutes, I returned to the previous week. Once again I was back at Chatsworth School.

"Beth, Beth, where are you? Miss Calmers is looking for you everywhere. She wants you to be on the picnic committee and I'm to be on it also. Beth! Beth?" Susan's enthusiasm nearly overwhelmed her and I answered quickly for fear that she would burst.

"Over here, Susan. Now what's all the commotion about?"

"We're to be on the picnic committee and we have ever so much to do. We've got to select the flowers and plan the events. Won't that be fun? I'm going to suggest a may-pole dance and after that a scavenger hunt. I do so love mysteries, don't you? Of course you do. Come along now or we'll be late."

"You certainly are a silly bunny, Susan. It's not even May, but I know that won't stop you." I could see a faint frown line itself around her generous mouth and I quickly tried to placate her. She was such a good friend. "A may-pole dance it will be; it should be worlds of fun. I've got to change my dress, so I'll meet you in Miss Calmers' office. See you there."

The weather had been beautiful and everyone was excited about the forthcoming picnic that would mark the final day of commencement. In a few days I would be

returning home with the certificate of completion for which I had worked so hard. I looked forward to my aunt's pleased expression when I presented it to her. I had done well; she would be happy and proud. The picnic would be the day after tomorrow and afterwards we would all exchange addresses and parting confidences. There was so much to do and so little time left, but that all added to the excitement. Yet, those last few days, so wonderfully full of promise, had ended with tragedy.

As I opened the door to Miss Calmers' office, I could sense that something was terribly wrong. She handed me a faded yellow telegram. Who would be sending me a telegram and why? I watched Miss Calmer's face carefully, afraid to read the message, but her expression was set in a firmly controlled mask. I was terrified.

"ELIZABETH STOP AUNT ALICIA PASSED AWAY YESTERDAY EVENING STOP SUGGEST YOU RETURN IMMEDIATELY STOP WILL MEET YOU AT THE STATION AND EXPLAIN STOP SINCERELY STOP DR. ANDREWS." The message was brutally clear, but it just couldn't be true, and for an instant I felt burning anger. Why had he sent me this false message? Aunt Alicia *couldn't* die; she was all I had left in this world and I was going to show her my certificate. But even as I said these words aloud, I knew I was merely venting impossible hopes. She had been my whole world since the death of my parents and now that world was gone. I was unable to move or cry. My eyes begged Miss Calmers for help.

"I've read the telegram. I know the shock you must be feeling. But you mustn't let this destroy your own life. You're young and the world holds a lot in store for you; believe me, dear. I've already made arrangements for you to be taken to the station. It may sound cruel to you, but

it would be best if your friends did not know the reason for your leaving. I know that you don't want to ruin their last few days here or the commencement party and I'm afraid that that's exactly what would happen. I'll explain the situation to them after the picnic; it's best that way. Now come along, child, and we'll pack the things you'll need."

Miss Calmers' motherly tone helped me through the next few hours. She kept me too busy packing to think about the tragedy that had altered my life. I blessed her for that in my memory. She stood by me until the train pulled from the station and I waved goodby. My life at Chatsworth was ended.

The trip back home was a nightmare of unending memories, each tearing at my heart. I looked out through steaming windows at utter desolation. Even the twisted trees seemed to reach out for me and laugh cruelly at my despair. Each clack of the wheels sneered at me: *she's dead . . . she's dead . . . she's dead*, and I found myself caught in a web of fright. How could I face seeing her in a casket so cold and distant? I knew that I couldn't. Somehow, I would have to find some way of avoiding that ordeal and I prayed that she would understand. I loved her too much. She had been too vital to be viewed without the spark of life.

True to his word, Dr. Andrews met me at the station. One glance at his worried face made me realize that something was disturbing him beyond the death of my aunt, despite the great loss to him. He actually seemed to be afraid of *me*. Why that should be so I didn't know, but, my own alarm increasing, I felt that something was being kept from me. But what? I was soon to find out.

"Elizabeth, I think you know how I feel about Alicia's death and I'll not burden you with my own grief. She

passed away suddenly but peacefully and that may comfort you now. I was with her to the end." His voice changed and reflected his discomfort. "Beth, there's something you'll have to know and understand. It's difficult for me to tell you because it is still difficult for me to comprehend her reasons. She was *cremated* yesterday. It was her wish that it be done and I was unable to talk her out of it. Her stated reasons you'll learn at the funeral, which will take place at midnight. It's strange, I know, but that's the way she wanted it and that's the way it will be."

Cremated. The word struck me like a whip and I mentally recoiled. I understood then what was worrying the good doctor. He thought that I would object to its being done, but then he couldn't know how often she had talked about this last bizarre memorial. She had felt that fire would cleanse the mortal body of its corruption. To me, cremation seemed barbarous, but she was always adamant when we had discussed it. It was her will, but I was truly thankful that I didn't have to give orders to have it done.

Poor Dr. Andrews. Cremation went against his grain as well, but his love and respect for my aunt had set him upon the proper course. He escorted me home and introduced me to the other men waiting there. I had met Mr. Simms before, but the other man was a complete stranger to me. Dr. Andrews introduced him simply as Torder, but I added the forgotten "mister" in my mind. It was not like Dr. Andrews to forget a simple formality and I wondered why he had. Mr. Torder was strange and completely silent, but then there was little to talk about at that moment. I soon dismissed him from my thoughts. We waited until midnight and then set out.

The trip was over now and Aunt Alicia was waiting. Waiting! Yes, she was waiting for me to return to the present.

"I'm sorry to have been such a fool, Dr. Andrews. You're quite right; she deserves to rest now. I'll not delay any longer." It was bravado speaking and he knew it. He reached out and grasped my hand in friendship and support.

"There now, child. I fully ken what you're feeling now. Hard as it is, I know you've got the courage to carry it off; you're of her blood. It'll be over soon and then you'll understand the reasons for what has already taken place. Are you ready now?" The burrs and roughness of his speech faded into the background and only the genuine concern in his manner came forward. He would be my strength as he had been my aunt's; that was his promise.

"Yes, doctor. I'm ready and thank you." I held his hand tightly as we walked forward to join the others.

The sun, long hidden, suddenly broke from behind the clouds and illuminated the small garden plot by the side of the house. The garden was her pride. Each of the flowers clinging so tenaciously to life had been a constant pleasure to her. As we came closer, I noticed that a small area had been cleared and a hole dug in the yielding soil. That this was to be her burial plot seemed only fitting. She would rest among the beauty she had fostered.

I waited, unable then to escape another feeling that we were all celebrants in a weird ritual better suited for a masked tragedy. We went through our paces as though this were the most normal of burials, but I knew that there was a hidden reason for the performance. The wild ride through the countryside in the middle of the night—seemed to be a test, some gauntlet that had to be run. But

why? I had been promised answers. I was certain that the others felt the strangeness of the situation, but I sensed that they knew those answers and that thought sustained me through the ordeal.

"Miss Elizabeth, I'm aware that this ceremony must appear quite alien to you. It is to all of us present. Your aunt gave explicit instructions, however, even as to her ban on a religious service. Still, if you'll permit it, I would like to say a short prayer." Mr. Simms, the polished and precise Mr. Simms, wanted to pray for Aunt Alicia. It seemed incongruous, but it was clear that this man wanted to bid his farewell in the only way he knew. I couldn't refuse him and I felt in my heart that she wouldn't either.

"Thank you, Mr. Simms. I would appreciate that very much." I bowed my head and waited for him to begin while my thoughts swirled. Why had she forbidden a religious observance? She had not been a regular church goer, but she was fond of reading the Bible every Sunday and I had never questioned her defection from the New England norm. She was a woman who had believed deeply in moral concepts and lived by them, often embarrassingly. How many times had she uncomplainingly accepted the unkindness of others because she felt it only right to forgive them their cupidity? She was no saint, but there was something more than just a strict old woman behind her manner. She had built her life on the principles she revered and was content to leave it so. She had been loved by many and Mr. Simms, for all his pomposity, was one.

"Dear Lord, we commend into your keeping the soul of Alicia Farnsworth in the certain knowledge that she will find grace and forgiveness in your sight. What she did, she did in the belief that it was best for those she deeply loved. She was a good woman and all who knew

her loved her. We pray your infinite compassion. Amen." His voice, quiet yet sonorous, seemed to be pleading. What had my aunt done? As far as I knew, she had never willingly done anything wrong in her life, but her closest friends thought otherwise. Why? Why?

"Torder, will you please bring the urn so we can complete the formalities as rapidly as possible? Dr. Andrews, do you wish to say anything?" Mr. Simms' voice seemed to carry a negative.

"Nay, I dinna think so." The doctor's face was lined with creases, but his eyes blazed with undaunted youth. It had ever been a source of amazement to me that he had not married her, because I knew that he'd wanted to desperately. She had always managed to stall his proposals in a way that had saved his pride and nourished his love. A lonely woman, something had always held her back from her own happiness. I searched his expression carefully for some clue to what separated them, but his grief veiled all. The poor dear man was beyond reading.

"Torder, have the ashes been dispersed?" Mr. Torder silently presented the near empty container. Mr. Simms motioned him towards the grave and then stood frozen in place while Mr. Torder lowered the urn into the still damp earth. The somewhat harsh tone of command, which he had used in addressing Mr. Torder, evaporated as the urn disappeared, and he grew obviously uncomfortable. Whatever power the grave may hold on the living now took hold of us and turned us away from Aunt Alicia's resting place. A cold emptiness descended on us.

"I would suggest that we leave Torder to finish the details and return to the house. There are several matters that have to be discussed and, although this hardly seems the proper time, circumstances are such that they will have to be dealt with now. I am sorry, but your aunt's

last wishes allow me little or no choice in the matter." Once again, I could sense an underlying current of anxiety behind Mr. Simms' otherwise straightforward manner, as if he knew a great deal more than he was willing to admit. Whatever my childhood memories of his formal, precise stuffiness, the man standing before me seemed at the point of panic. The well-rehearsed steps of the morbid ritual had come to an end and Mr. Simms was out of his depth.

"Aye, there's much to be done. Beth, forgive what you probably consider our indecent rush, and try to realize that we are only acting out a pattern ordered by your aunt. I dinna want you to puzzle and worry any more. If you'll take my hand, we'll go into the house." By Dr. Andrews' hasty speech, my suspicions were confirmed. He seemed to be pleading for my understanding.

"I don't blame you for your rushing through the burial and I don't want you to think that I do, but this whole service has left me quite unsettled. You loved Aunt Alicia deeply and I know that you would never do anything to slight her memory—it's not in you to do that. Doctor, I don't know why she decided on this strange observance, but I have enough faith in her to know that she had good reasons. I'll take your hand gladly; it's a hand that's helped me often enough." I tried to soften my voice so that he would take comfort in my friendship.

Dr. Andrews quietly glowed with renewed warmth. Those same features, which on professional occasions could seem so severe when ordering a small girl to take a dose of unpleasant medication, now eased themselves into the gentle creases of an aging but exceptionally kind man I had always revered. I felt relieved. I looked upon Dr. Andrews almost as my father. The years had been kind to him and his unbounded warmth had sheltered

me from the cold austerity of being an orphan. My aunt for my mother and the doctor for my father—the combination had always made me feel wanted and secure. He had given me much and gained little in return, but I knew he accepted that as he had accepted her loss. He was a wonderful man, more wonderful than I could say.

We walked together, arm in arm, around to the front of the house. I paused for a second to wipe my feet on the wrought-iron bootscraper before realizing that there would no longer be anyone to remind me of its necessity. My aunt had been a stickler for cleanliness and in this she was seconded by our housekeeper, Maggie. Between the two, I had learned early that if cleanliness wasn't next to godliness, it was at least next to harmony in our household. To see Maggie following my footsteps with a mop was enough for me to step carefully and quickly or else face the risk of being swabbed along with the floor. Maggie could be a terror in her domain, but she was more like a mother hen than an angry disciplinarian. I missed her terribly. She would not be returning until next week from her annual vacation. She and her husband, Sean, who doubled as our handyman besides running their small farm, had gone off to Boston to see their son who was, I believe, finishing his residency at Boston Hospital. The son was their pride and joy and typically my aunt took him to her heart. Maggie and Sean had worked hard on their farm, but the soil was poor and produced little more than a crop of bleak rocks and heavy debts. My aunt had actually created work for them, although she was quite capable of managing her home herself. But what had started as charity the years had forged into a chain of mutual concern. I had never met the son, as he had been living with Maggie's sister for economic reasons, but I knew something of his history. Maggie would never

have asked for charity in his behalf, nor would my aunt have offered it, but she was too astute not to notice Maggie's concern for her son's future and she filled the breach in her own inimitable way. She paid for the boy's education in the best Eastern schools and when he wanted to go on to medical school, she provided the funds, all with the firm understanding that he would someday return to this county and use his education for the benefit of the local population.

It was so like my aunt to give freely of her wealth. Maggie would be heartbroken when she returned. I prayed that my aunt had made some provision for her in her will. I thought quite probably she had, but in any case I would see that she and Sean were taken care of. They also had been like a family to me.

"Doctor, I was just reminded that Maggie's son should be returning soon from Boston. I'm certain that my aunt had plans in mind for him and although I don't mean to sound presumptuous, I would like to see them carried out to the best of my ability—or does that sound ridiculous?" I felt faintly defensive.

"No, not ridiculous, never that. You'll not need to worry about that young man. I've already written to him and asked him to assist me in my practice. He has accepted." Dr. Andrews patted my shoulder as we entered the dining room. He held out a seat for me and waited until I was settled before squeezing himself gingerly into an antique chair of undetermined origin. He was a big man and his stout frame seemed to dwarf the chair's delicate scrollwork. His struggles brought a slight smile to my face, the first in many hours.

Mr. Simms then entered the room and brought us back to the present eerie situation. He picked up his leather briefcase and began to leaf through a number of legal

documents until he found the right one, then placed a pair of steel-rimmed glasses on his thin nose and began to read. "*I, Alicia Farnsworth, being of sound mind and body do . . .*" He looked at us searchingly for a moment, then said hesitantly, "I'm going to pass over the preamble and legal terminology and get directly to the bequests—unless, of course, you have any objections. No? Fine, then I will proceed. The initial bequests are to a number of charities which I shall not list as the monies for this have already been placed in trust. The next bequest is in favor of a Mrs. Margaret Talbot and her husband, Sean Talbot. I was informed that they wouldn't be returning until next week; is that correct?"

"Yes," I said. "That's quite correct."

"I see. Well, basically, your aunt has made provisions for their future. It's a generous amount and I assure you it will be quite adequate for all their needs. I can see no purpose in itemizing the provisions at this time. I will be in contact with them when they return." He scanned further along the will and then straightened his back as if he were ready to make a speech on the parade ground.

"Am I right in assuming that you agree with your aunt's intentions towards the Talbots?"

"Certainly," I stated firmly. "It's her money and she had the right to dispose of it in any way that suited her. Besides, I happen to know that they deserve it. Why do you ask?"

"I've no ulterior motive, I assure you, nor am I trying to dissuade you from agreeing to this bequest. I am merely attempting to avoid any unpleasant aftertaste. It has been my experience that misunderstandings and recriminations can come about unless there's an agreement to start with. Nothing more." Mr. Simms sounded hurt.

"There'll be no wrangling; to the contrary, I'm pleased

that they have been provided for. Please forgive me for my suspicions; I didn't mean to insult you in any way."

"No insult taken." He relaxed visibly. "I'm going to read the next bequest verbatim as it involves you personally." He smiled in my direction. "It's short and to the point, but it will involve some explanation after the reading. 'To my niece, Elizabeth Halsley, I leave all my property, both real and personal, and all monies and income not already bequeathed by me. I hereby appoint my dearest friend, Dr. Edward Andrews, to serve as executor over the funds that have been placed in trust with the stipulation that he administer them until such time as he deems my niece capable of managing for herself.' That concludes the major bequest."

"I'm quite inexpert in these matters, but is there really any need for explanations? It seems simple enough and I don't imagine there's that much money involved. Is there?" My voice and my thoughts were in accord—questioning.

"Obviously," he intoned, "you're laboring under a substantial misapprehension. Your aunt was an extremely wealthy woman and I dare say, you are now in the same financial situation. It will be some time before I can correlate all her holdings, but it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that you are now one of the richest women in the state. Your aunt was an astute investor and, I might add, our firm was pleased to assist her. However, the explanations I was referring to have nothing to do with that matter." He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts and then reached into his briefcase. He extracted another document and three thickly stuffed envelopes which he placed face down on the highly polished table. "Dr. Andrews, are you in agreement?"

I'd no idea what they were talking about, but I could

detect some communication taking place. No words were uttered, but the message was passed.

Dr. Andrews looked at me for a moment and then nodded. "Aye, I agree."

"There's a codicil to this will which now demands attention." Mr. Simms adjusted his glasses, which were slowly drooping, and cleared his throat. "Under the provisions of the codicil, Dr. Andrews assenting, I am instructed to turn over to each of you the sealed envelopes bearing your names. I'll do so now." He picked up the three envelopes and handed one to me and then one to Dr. Andrews; the remaining one he placed carefully on the table top so that the name wasn't visible. He gathered together his papers and then rose from the table. "I'll be outside when you need me," he said as he left the room.

His sudden departure was unsettling, but as I glanced down at the envelope before me, all thoughts of his strange behavior vanished from my mind. The name traced on it was my own and I recognized my aunt's handwriting; it was a message from the dead and for some unknown reason I dreaded having to open it. I turned towards Dr. Andrews to question him, but I saw that he was already engrossed in his letter and withdrawn from me. My fears were foolish and I tore the sealed flap open angrily to vent my growing fear.

Chapter Three

THERE WERE five sheets of parchment-like stationery and each was filled with my aunt's careful writing. The date at the top of the page was only a week old and I realized that she must have written it shortly before her death. It was a chilling sensation. I found myself close to tears as I began to read her final letter to me.

"Elizabeth, you've been through a harrowing night, but you've shown your courage and fortitude or else this letter would have been destroyed before you read it; those were my orders. You must have many questions, but I ask you to bear with me a while longer and try to understand what I am going to tell you. There's so much that you must understand, and I blame myself for not having told you before. How shall I tell you without fostering a deep wound of hatred? I don't know, but perhaps, understanding, you will forgive me; such is my hope."

What did she mean and why should I hate her? I felt a twinge of fear in my heart. Afraid to continue, I was more afraid not to. Courage? I was terrified.

"Our family has lived in this state since before the Revolution. I mention this because I want you to be aware of our justifiable pride in being deeply rooted to this soil; it has influenced our actions and our values considerably.

"Your grandmother, my sister, gave birth to your mother on this very farm and died in the ordeal. Your

grandfather was a fine figure of a man. He was devoted heart and soul to his young wife. He loved her passionately and they had been ecstatically happy until Mr. Lincoln called for war. War caused their separation and he went off to defend the union with his body and with his life. She was with child when word was brought to her that her husband had perished; the life went out of her then. Beth, can you comprehend the extent of the tragedy that I'm relating? It's vitally important that you do.

"Your mother was a beautiful baby, screaming, shouting for life, but her crying went unheard by her mother as she had died in giving life. It is my belief that her husband's death brought about her own and I could not forget that he was a soldier. War had killed my sister and war is a soldier's future. I hate war, hate what it did to my dearest sister."

My grandfather: I remembered seeing the elegantly colored tintype in an old trunk long hidden in the attic. As a child, I'd rummaged through its treasures and invented countless fantasies about the handsome young man in his splendid uniform, but I'd never guessed his identity. My aunt would have tanned my hide had she known about my scavenging in the forbidden room. I'd also seen her picture hanging in my aunt's room and had always been drawn to it. She was supremely beautiful, yet somehow angelic. Her eyes said so many soft, graceful things. I could understand her tragedy and my aunt's heartbreak. How close they must have been.

"Your mother was more beautiful then I can express; She was the perfect picture of my sister and every time I looked at her, my heart rejoiced in the likeness. I raised her, as I raised you, from the day of her birth, and in my heart she became my own dear child. Beth, I loved her as I've loved you. She was everything that a mother

prays for; she brightened my life each day with her gay laughter and lilting speech. She grew rapidly and, like you, attended the Chatsworth School as did her mother before her. You see, my dear, we are a family of tradition through repetition. She did excellently in her studies and then returned here, her home. For a year, I had her with me until once again fate intervened. Your mother met and fell in love with your father. He too was a soldier."

The tears that had been welling behind my lids suddenly burst forth and salted my cheeks. My mother, the mother I'd never known, was before me now in the lines of my aunt's writing. I'd seen her picture countless times, but not until now did she really come alive for me. My aunt had raised us both and now I understood what she meant by tradition. Three generations of us had been encompassed by her love; how lucky we were. I read on.

"I believe your father, George Halsley, was a basically decent man, but he was a professional soldier and that fact alone alienated me against his courtship of my daughter. My memory of my sister's death was still too fresh in my mind to let me overlook his profession and I admit that I fought against his desires to take my daughter away from me. Unfortunately, I was not successful and they were married at the registry office; they couldn't even wait for a proper ceremony."

This couldn't be my aunt; she wasn't like that, she couldn't have been. I was seeing her in a different light. I felt the stirrings of disgust. My mother had been able to overcome her fears, but my aunt had relished them. How could she have? Why had a soldier's uniform frightened her so? Perhaps she would explain and, with this in mind, I continued.

"Your father was a young lieutenant at the time of the marriage and your mother was overly entranced by the

gaudy uniform so that she was unable or unwilling to face the responsibilities that would accrue. He was a gentleman, I grant him that, and had he been other than a soldier, I would have welcomed him warmly. Unfortunately, fate again saw fit to intervene with tragedy.

"Your mother returned home with a tale that I had long been expecting, but dreading. She was pregnant and in trouble. Your father had been ordered to report immediately to his unit on the Mexican border to put down a skirmish and your mother was distraught. She tried her best to adapt to the situation, but shortly before your birth, word arrived that the entire unit had been wiped out and she wilted completely and disastrously. The story, unconfirmed as it was, had already done its damage and your mother died in childbirth—exactly as had her mother. I became the guardian of a beautiful squalling infant once again. Can you understand how protective I felt and how determined to protect you from any harm? I loved you so very much, Beth."

Yes, I understood her feelings. I now saw the chain of events that had been only vaguely alluded to before. She must have loved us to the exclusion of her own happiness and that's why she'd passed up her own chances of marriage. How could I have questioned that dedication?

"Beth, your father is not dead!"

No! It wasn't true; I had misread the line. It couldn't be true; she wouldn't lie, couldn't have lied all these years. The letter dropped from my hands as if it were a weight too heavy to hold. I was too dazed to pick it up even if I'd wanted to, which I didn't. She had been my whole world, she had made certain of that. My head was spinning with the sickening realization of what that lie meant and I found myself unable to remain in this room any longer; this room was hers. It was all a nightmare, a

frighteningly hideous sequel to the night's horror, and it was enveloping me with its cloying web. I had to escape, had to.

"Beth, where are you going?" Dr. Andrews' voice was faint though his question pursued me as I ran through the dripping woods too hysterical to care about what he was saying.

"Beth . . . Beth . . . Beth . . . come back . . . come back." His commands kept pace; he was following me through my flight. He was too old to continue at this rate; if he did he would most surely suffer severe consequences. I stopped running.

"What in heaven's name do you think you're doing?" he panted. "What's gotten into you?" He spluttered as he attempted to gulp quantities of air into his tortured lungs.

"Please, doctor . . . please don't question me now. I don't want to think about anything but what I can see and touch. I don't want to feel; I can't." My mind locked tight and refused to retrace the labyrinth of dismay.

"You'd better take this," he said, handing me his handkerchief. "You're going to need it." He stood facing me until I wiped the flowing tears from my eyes, then continued relentlessly. "You've been hurt, that much is obvious, but what makes you think that you've the right to hold yourself inviolate from reality?"

He wasn't making any sense. I was facing reality; the reality was that she had lied to me my whole life and robbed me of my father. She was a lying, scheming thief.

"Now what's bothering you?" His tone was utterly devoid of sarcasm, but I felt it nevertheless.

"She lied to me," I wailed. "She lied, lied, lied!"

"Aye, she did that," he said. "There's no need denying it, but have you stopped to think why she did what she did?"

"I don't want to think about it. I told you that so why can't you just let me be?" I knew that he was motivated by concern for me, but then, so had she been, or so she had said.

"Let you be what?" He was angry now.

"By myself," I countered. "Just leave me alone."

"It's not that easy. Like it or not, you're my responsibility in more than the legal sense. I delivered you and that gives me more than a little right to demand your attention. You might not agree with me, but you are going to listen to me even if I have to hold you forcibly. Is that clear?" He wasn't just talking to hear his own voice; he meant it.

"Yes, it's clear," I answered.

"Now, young lady, let's get back to the house and discuss this matter in a civilized fashion. I'm too old and brittle to be charging through the woods. Right now I feel each and every year of my age." He spoke more softly now. "You're not alone, Beth; don't forget that for a moment. I'm not going to desert you and I've a few facts that may help you understand why she felt she had to lie to you. Will you give me that chance?"

"Yes," I replied, "I'll give you that chance."

"This isn't exactly the spot to hold such a conversation," he quipped. "Dark woods do little to lighten the spirit. Our talk will be difficult enough without the distraction of gloomy surroundings. Let's find a more uplifting place, shall we?"

"If we must," I answered, "but not back to *her* house."

"It's your house now. Perhaps, when you know the truth, you'll feel differently about several matters." He felt me drawing away from him and added, "Trust me, Beth."

"I want to, but I trusted her and she lied or worse." I

avoided his glance as I could not bear to see the hurt expression that I knew would be there.

"Be honest, Beth. She lied to you, you're painfully aware of that right now, but certainly she deserves a fair hearing. Don't condemn her before you know the whole unvarnished truth, or you may well regret it the rest of your life." He placed his strong hands on my shoulders, spun me about until I was facing his blazing eyes, and held me there. "Look at me, Beth," he demanded. "Look me in the eyes and tell me that you want no part of me and I'll leave you to yourself." He searched my face carefully. "But you'll have to say it to my face."

My head was splitting with unresolved questions. I felt as if I were two separate people at war with one another: Alicia's niece versus the lieutenant's daughter. What was I to do? I wanted to escape this soul-destroying quest, but I knew I couldn't; not now, perhaps not ever. If I were to find peace again, I would have to find strength to face the ordeal in store for me. I nodded my head in resignation. "I'm so confused, doctor. I loved her and that's become part of me, but how can I love someone who did what she did? Can you answer that?" I fairly pleaded with him.

"No, I don't think so," he said, "but I can help you find your own answer, which is infinitely better in the long run. Will you come with me now?" He extended his hands and I grasped them tightly. "I think I'd follow you to hell and back, doctor."

"Oh, I dinna think I'd ask that of you, but it's a start in trust. I offered you my strength before and that offer still holds, so if you feel that you canna bear anymore, hold on and I'll carry you through. That's a promise." His tone was lighter now, but there was still an undercurrent of sorrow hidden in the charming phrases.

We walked together out of the threatening darkness into early morning sunlight and my thoughts kept pace with the change in landscape. I noticed that Dr. Andrews was limping slightly and that his knees were stained with caked mud. He must have fallen while pursuing me. The dear man would never have mentioned the fall, but his struggle to disguise it recalled me to his gentle nature and diluted the acidity of the past few moments. I placed my arm about him, but, if he was aware of my support, he made no comment. I wondered briefly where we were heading. We weren't returning to the house and the road we were on led back to the town. Surely we weren't going to hike that distance?

"There's a wee glade up ahead that I've always been fond of. We could both do with some rest after that helter-skelter chase." Dr. Andrews turned right as he spoke and I could see a break in the wooded barrier. "Here it is."

I marveled at the small glade's perfection. Wild daisies and goldenrod waved in the soft breeze. As if the glade were a theater, the maples and rugged pines seemed to be waiting for a performance of some sort and, as we entered, dipped their branches expectantly. The birds in the trees were chattering a conversation which even our unexpected entrance did not disrupt. As we made our way to a fallen birch, they seemed to draw us into their gossip. I could easily understand why he found this place enchanting. "It's beautiful, doctor, just beautiful."

"Aye, it is that," he nodded. "It's been this way forty years or more." He took off his heavy tweed jacket and placed it across the birch log so that I could sit without feeling the dampness, then helped me over some bramble and sat down next to me. "Sometimes, when things get too much for me, I come here and find peace unmarred

by the outside world. It's a precious gift we've been given, this unspoiled beauty. At times like these we can well do with it." He spoke calmly, with love. "Do you want to talk about it now, or would you rather wait?"

"Doctor, why did she lie to me all these years?" My voice reflected my bitter sorrow. "Why did she rob me of my heritage? No, that's not the right word, but I'm sure you know what I mean. What reason could she have had?"

"Elizabeth, there's a great deal that I can and am going to tell you, but first you had better finish reading the letter she left you." He took it from his pocket and handed it to me, adding wryly, "You dropped it in your exodus and I brought it along."

The pages were rumpled now, but the writing was still shockingly clear. I didn't want to read any more of it, but I knew that the doctor would help me only if I did; that was clear from his intense stare at the sheets in my hand.

"You must hate me for lying to you all these years, but I beg you to listen to me before you condemn me."

The words were the same that Dr. Andrews had used when he tried to make me see reason. For an instant, I had the distinct impression that the similarity was not entirely accidental, but the thought became too vague for me to consider. I continued reading, even as I recalled the night's suspense and the lonely funeral service.

"For three years after your birth, we heard no word from your father and so I assumed that he had indeed died in Mexico; then, suddenly, a telegram arrived saying that he was alive and asking for information about his wife. He didn't mention you and I realized that he never knew his wife had been pregnant when he left for the army. I found myself intriguing so that he would never know that you had been born and were with me.

"I telegraphed him and told him that your mother was dead these three years, but made no mention of your existence. I told myself that if he returned here, I would give you to him, but he never came and I never heard from him again; that is, until two weeks ago."

If what she said was true, why had he suddenly decided to write after all these long years?

"I had hidden you from him for reasons that I must now tell you. When your mother died, something in me died as well; call it conscience if you wish, but I rather think it was abiding faith in mankind. Does that sound so strange to you? My sister, then your mother, both dead in childbirth, both married to soldiers who were not there when they were needed most. How could I give you up, a small babe, to a man whose very profession meant that you would never have the security of a home, never know when he would be forced to leave you to be raised by a succession of disinterested nurses? Love you as he might, he could never provide the home you deserved; that was my only consideration. I could not put you through that ordeal. I obeyed the dictates of love above those of church and state."

Church and state: herein could be found the reason she had forbidden a religious observance. In her own mind, she had put herself beyond the bounds of the church, willing to risk damnation for me. That consideration alone staggered, then humbled me before her memory.

"I've attempted to provide for you all I feared he would be unable to. I believe I was successful; perhaps my salvation depends on how successful I was. You now know my motive for hiding your existence from your father and so you should be able to understand why I've lied to you, but—and this is an important but—you will have to decide this matter for yourself.

"Your father is alive and now knows you are too. Three weeks ago, I suffered a mild attack which led me to contact him and tell him the truth. His harsh reply demanded your return to him. I felt his tone unwarranted but the request justified. However, the decision is yours to make. Your father needs you, Elizabeth, and I believe you must go to him. You will need courage and fortitude more than ever before, because your father is, to a great degree, blind. Go to him, Beth, and forgive me if you can. Dr. Andrews will provide you with other necessary information that is beyond my strength to convey. Trust him, my dearest, he's the most honorable man I have ever known.

"Forgive me again and God keep you well."

At last, I had the truth, but at what a cost! At that moment, I loved Aunt Alicia more than I'd thought possible, to my sorrow and chagrin. She was wrong to have taken upon herself the roles of judge and jury, but could I blame her for an act she felt was in my best interest? My father was alive. In my excitement I overlooked the threatening note of blindness, but only for an instant. Confused, I turned to Dr. Andrews for guidance. "Doctor, you know what's in this letter. Help me."

"As much as I can," he answered, "but you'll have to decide after I've placed more facts before you. It's plain to me that you no longer hate Alicia and that speaks worlds for your character; on that basis alone, I'll attempt to explain her actions further." Our conversation was obviously causing him great suffering; yet, he continued. "I'm afraid there's more to the story, perhaps more than Alicia fully understood herself, because of her own moral code. Your mother wasn't all that Alicia ascribed to her. She was beautiful, light-hearted, and full of life, but she remained a spoiled child to the end of her days and that,

more than anything else, caused this unfortunate happening. She wasn't a—"

"What're you saying?" I demanded angrily. "What right have you to blame her for what happened? She was dead before Alicia lied, and yet you want to place this at her door. I won't listen to this; you've no right to ask me." I jumped up from the log, propelled by anger and disdain.

"Sit down!" There was no longer any softness in his voice, only stern, cold command.

I sat down quickly, trembling slightly as the force of his voice washed over me.

"You asked for my help and you're going to get it whether you like the method or not. I told Alicia years ago that she would destroy what she wanted to preserve if she kept you ignorant of the truth, but she was far too lenient and soft-hearted to disabuse you of your romantic notions. So it is all the more difficult to assist you now. I'm going to ask you just one more time whether you're prepared to listen to the truth or not. Think about it carefully, because there's not much time left. Will you listen?"

"I'll listen," I replied meekly, "and I'm sorry to have abused you; truly I am."

"We'll say no more about it then. Why your mother returned to Alicia's house your aunt never knew, although she may have suspected. I knew because I was her physician and confidant. The reason was that your mother wanted to leave her husband. When he received his orders, she used this as an excuse to becloud her own perfidy. That shocks you, I know, but it's true. She confessed to me and then turned my oath against me to prevent me from telling your aunt. I was powerless. I could only watch in disgust while she played upon your

aunt's sympathies and ingrained hatreds. It wasn't a pretty performance, but it was effective." As he spoke, his shoulders slumped and a strange transformation took place in his powerful frame. He suddenly seemed to age twenty years before my eyes.

"You seemed fairly surprised when Mr. Simms informed you of your aunt's financial position, didn't you?" he said tiredly. "Well, she kept it from you for a reason."

"I understand very little about any of this," I said, "but I would like to know."

"Your mother knew Alicia was wealthy. She used that wealth to bribe her way through life until she found what she considered even more amusing than money: social power. She couldn't buy that and so she married it. Harsh? Yes, but true. She married George Halsley for the Halsley name and for an introduction into the world she considered her own. But she underestimated her husband's honor and insight. He saw through her. He challenged her love by requesting a border assignment and asking her to accompany him. He wanted to save the marriage, but not she. Her decision was evident in her action. She returned home with a tale of woe that bore no more relation to the truth than was absolutely necessary. Your aunt was gulled, Beth; Alicia was played for a fool. But she did learn that an awareness of one's wealth could be damaging to her character and so she kept it from you until you would have to know. She was a decent woman, Beth. Can you see that clearer now?"

My mind was racing with information I had been forced to swallow and could not completely digest. "Doctor, was my mother really so narrow a person? I find that hard to believe. My aunt always idealized her and told me how wonderful she was, but if what you say is true, why then my mother turned Alicia against my fa-

ther and caused her to deny my existence to him. Is that the way it was?"

"Exactly," he said. He cradled my head between his huge hands. "You've grown up rapidly these last few minutes and that's no mean feat. You're Alicia's daughter, that's for certain, and so you'll find that your majority isn't all that bad." The sparkle that had faded from his eyes now returned and illuminated his kindly face. "I think it's about time we returned to the house and gave Mr. Simms his answer."

"His answer?" I questioned.

"You are going to go to your father, aren't you?" he asked. "Well, Mr. Simms and Torder have to be told and arrangements made for the journey to Ardsmore, to Haelstrom Manor.

"I want to go, but I've still many questions. I don't know anything about my father. He may not be at all anxious for me to join him." My mother had ruined his life and I was her daughter: not exactly the best references to bring with me. I would have to know more no matter how painful the answers.

"You're right, Beth." He spoke sagely and with conviction. "It's a difficult decision to make, but we're here to help you, all of us. It'd be easier if we returned to the others, because they have facts I don't possess which may be vital to your decision."

I still didn't want to return, didn't want to leave this peaceful glade, but there was no denying his wisdom. The process of growing up had already gone past the point of return and I rose to my feet in resignation. "I'm ready."

The birds that had been chattering incessantly now interrupted their singing and awaited the finale to the performance with silent stares, as if slightly disappointed.

The wind rustled through the verdant leaves and then the birds resumed their strident calling as we made our way through the underbrush and emerged onto the road. The glade vanished from sight and memory as we walked towards the house. It was as if it had never existed.

We walked quickly, without talking, and my thoughts marched beside me in cadence. My aunt was dead. Dead with her were my past conceptions, or misconceptions. What now faced me? A chill clawed up my spine and the dread of the unknown years, behind and ahead, made me tremble. I'd learned much, but what was still to be learned frightened me. I fought to keep my wits about me, to counter the heartbreak that I felt lay ahead.

The door swung open on its hinges with only the slightest squeal of complaint and we entered into the dining room's atmosphere of restrained but unleashed suspense. There was a fire going in the fireplace, its dancing flames selecting first one and then another figure seated before it with the abandon of an ancient rite. One figure rose from that satanical altar and approached us; Mr. Simms held out his hand in greeting.

"Have you made your decision?" he asked.

"Yes, I've made my decision," I answered. "I'll go." The voice was mine, but not the will. A power totally beyond me supplied the answer and committed me. "I'll go, but I'll need your help and your advice if I'm to manage."

"You shall have it," he pronounced. "Now let's talk."

Chapter Four

THE TRAIN, waiting at the station, seemed impatient to leave and was showing its displeasure by coughing up billows of soiled smoke which hung heavily in the motionless air. Like a turgid snake, its painted sides shedding in blotches, it stretched the full length of the platform and, as we walked towards the first few cars, swayed with an almost hypnotic motion. A grey overcast morning had done little to lighten the cold slate of the station itself and the hissing steam escaping from the undercarriage made the going slippery and ominous.

It seemed an endless walk to our car. For an instant, I felt the return of the nameless fear that had held me in thrall only two short evenings ago. I walked alongside Mr. Torder and found myself trying vainly to match his long, steady stride; I couldn't, and yet I felt loath to ask his indulgence. There was an unstated barrier of silence between us formed of some unknown hostility that sought to hide itself among the dreary events of leaving the home I had known so well. His conversation had been limited to barely comprehensible grunts and an occasional yes or no; not quite the most enjoyable traveling companion, but certainly an enigma that required solving. I made up my mind to get to the bottom of this mystery as soon as possible and so made no complaint

that would further drive him into the well of silence that he appeared to prefer.

If Mr. Torder noticed my discomfiture, he made no concessions. When we reached the open door to the railroad carriage he paused and offered me his hand to assist me up the rickety stairway. I accepted his offer gladly and wondered whether this could possibly be a breakthrough in his otherwise unfriendly manner; I hoped it was. At his direction, I seated myself next to a window and leaned back on the frayed upholstery. My eyes searched the grimy window for some sign of comfort. The scene outside was bleak, as was the interior of this ill-used and poorly swept car, but I had little time to dwell on this as the train rumbled threateningly, getting up steam. We were on our way.

"Mr. Torder, I don't know why you dislike me so; you've your reasons no doubt, but I shall need your assistance if I'm to avoid causing my father undue pain." The words seemed to be drawn from me against my will. "Won't you help me to help him?"

He didn't utter a word, but sat there silently as if appraising some course of action that required delving into past events. Under his unremitting stare, I felt my discomfort swell until, like a bubble, it burst and overflowed the bounds of reticence that had built up between us.

"Mr. Torder, if, as you've claimed, you're my father's friend," I said harshly, "then you will help me; if not, then you will remain silent. The choice is yours."

"You haven't left me any choice." He spoke carefully as if measuring each word for its ultimate effect. "You're right, of course, but that doesn't ease the telling any. My attitude towards you has been unforgivable; for that I am truly sorry. But I offer this in mitigation: I've served your father for more than twenty years and I had

to stand by helplessly while he was devoured by the past."

"I'm not my mother," I said quietly.

The statement startled him for an instant. Then his demeanor changed in a subtle yet noticeable way. There was a softening of his expression and for the first time since I had met him, he smiled; faintly, it's true, but smiled nevertheless.

"Young lady, you've put me to shame and I deserve it." There was friendship in his manner as he spoke, but it was, as yet, thin and fragile. "I mustn't let the past predicate the future. I don't know exactly where to begin—so much has happened—but history had best start at the beginning if it's to be useful. How much do you know about your father?"

"Only that he was a soldier, a lieutenant, I believe, and that he served on the Mexican border until he was captured. I've only just learned this. It's still not totally clear in my mind. That's the sum of my knowledge." I watched his face as I was relating my story and the open friendship I saw there cheered me considerably.

"As far as it goes," he commented, "it's quite true, but it's understated. Your father was held hostage for three years by a Mexican bandit, completely out of touch with his friends, which caused the rumor that he was dead—a rumor, I might add, that was almost true. Our entire unit was taken captive. It was your father who convinced the bandit to free us at last, not without great cost to himself and his family's fortune. But that's a tale for later times. When your father was released he tried to contact your mother, but was informed that she had died in the interim. Do you want the unvarnished truth?" he asked. "Or would you prefer a more romantic version?"

"The truth." I answered him with as much sincerity

as I could muster, but I was afraid and my tone didn't escape his inspection.

"You've more courage than I gave you credit for; I like that, as you'll have need of it. Your father was terribly shocked by her death. I suppose he held himself responsible for it, although intellectually he knew better. She made her own bed and she was buried by it; unpleasant, but it fits the facts too well to be discarded." He paused for a moment to judge my reaction, then continued. "I won't say that I agreed with him, but you've already noted that my attitude towards you was colored by past events and so I'll skip over that period. Strange as it may seem, your father learned a great deal while being held captive. Upon his return to the service this knowledge was taken advantage of; he was assigned to diplomatic service in Spain and acted as military attaché there until shortly before the outbreak of hostilities with that country. We returned to the—"

"We?" This was the first time I realized that he had shared my father's fate while in service.

"I was a young sub-lieutenent at the time of the capture and I followed him to Spain and beyond. As I was saying," he continued with a vague shrug of annoyance, "we returned to the United States for a short time and then went off to Cuba to fight. Things went relatively well for a time. Then misfortune struck and once again we were captured. This time, however, it was not for ransom we were held, but for political reasons, and that made it impossible for your father to help us in any way. Or so we thought at the time. But we were mistaken. They've got some stinking holes, those Dons, and our men were in sad shape within a short space of time—bad enough so that we thought few would make it to the end.

Your father was our commander and all looked to him for help, which, though hardly fair under the circumstances, is the way of military men the world over when faced with a problem they cannot solve. He found a way to help us, but perhaps that can wait until after we've broken our fast. I hear the chimes announcing luncheon. Would you mind terribly if I interrupted our conversation?" His tone was light and bantering now, but I sensed that he wanted some respite from the role of historian in which I had cast him.

"Not at all," I replied. "I'm famished."

He helped me to my feet with the support of his outstretched arm. I found myself more puzzled than ever about this strange man who was both a gentleman in his own right—an officer in our gentlemen's army, after all—and, at the same time, a servant to my father. His role seemed confusing, if not contradictory; yet, there was nothing servile about his composure. I was certain that he had his reasons, but what they might be was beyond my discernment.

As we walked through the swaying cars, I noticed how easily he balanced himself, and I was reminded of the ballet our class had recently seen in that he possessed the same flowing grace that had amazed us all at Chatsworth School. His broad-shouldered six-foot frame gave little hint of the dexterity he could manifest in those rare flashes when he was relaxed. At the door to the dining car he paused and extended his arm in a gesture that bespoke manners as well as experience; it was a completely natural gesture, but one that seemed out of keeping for his well-rehearsed part. He smiled.

"I'm afraid that the dining facilities on the train are rather provincial," he said, "but they'll have to do until we reach Albany."

"I don't think I shall notice the difference," I replied. "I'm too hungry to care."

He escorted me to a table, held my chair while I seated myself, then snapped his fingers with a faintly imperious gesture to alert the waiter, who was lounging disinterestedly against the serving-pantry doorway. The waiter answered his signal immediately, with that alacrity bred of knowing by rote those customers who were important enough or distraught enough to summon the head waiter. He brought with him two large and impressive menus which he placed on the linen-covered table with deference.

I studied the menu carefully with the same bottomless joy a hungry child feels when presented with a choice of several goodies each better than the last and each readily obtainable for the wheedling. I hadn't realized how famished I was until Mr. Torder had suggested eating, but once the idea was planted, my stomach seconded the motion and carried it.

"It all sounds delicious," I said, entranced. "What would you recommend?"

"Whatever your hea—" He paused and his expression changed by some strange alchemy into a scowl. "Whatever you wish."

I was startled for an instant. What had I said to bring about this change? The man facing me was once again Torder, silent, withdrawn Torder, but a moment ago he had been almost a friend. He had started to say "Whatever your heart desires," but something in that phrase had triggered his underlying hostility and he'd reverted to his original manner. It was the manner he'd worn before I proclaimed that I wasn't my mother. The answer to the riddle lay in that exchange, I was sure, but how could

I again break down the wall he had constructed about himself? I knew I had to try.

"Must I always walk your dreary path of memories?" I asked dejectedly. "Or will you accept me for myself? I'm not her; I never knew her, so please don't paint my picture on her canvas."

"Is it that obvious?" His voice seemed nostalgic yet alarmed. There was sorrow on his face and pain in his eyes.

"Yes, it is, or at least it is to me." I spoke honestly and his eyes searched mine to see if I was sincere. He seemed to find the openness he was seeking and the tautness left him, at least for the moment.

"You've caught me again. It seems to be becoming almost a habit. I am sorry, truly sorry, and promise to reform—that is, if you'll permit me to after the idiotic way I've treated you." Mr. Torder was back; the other Torder vanished from all but my memory as his eloquent plea reached me.

"It's not very ladylike of me, but could you please order for me? I feel as if I haven't eaten for a month of Sundays and I'm certain that I shall fade away unless you do." I hoped he would take this bantering request as a declaration of friendship. His answer demonstrated that he did.

"Touché!" He snapped his fingers and the waiter hurried over to our table, managing somehow to avoid hitting an immensely fat man who was half in the aisle trying to extract his wallet from a waistcoat that gripped his middle like an unalterable vise. The neat maneuver brought a smile of applause to Mr. Torder's features, which the waiter accepted with the gratitude of his profession—he recommended what was actually fit to eat, not what he had been told to say. He wrote our order rapidly on a

piece of foolscap, then hurried off with the rejoinder that he would return in "no time at all."

"Army man. . . . Cavalry, I'd say." Mr. Torder spoke in reference to the waiter, but held a note of undimmed pride. "Are you surprised? You needn't be. I'm not a soothsayer; the man's agility and balance have obviously been polished to a fine point and that's a certain mark of cavalrymen—they need it to avoid being whipped off their horses in combat by some low-hanging branch or suchlike. Sitting your saddle takes every bit of that balance." His eyes followed the waiter as he took the order of another couple. "Poor devil, probably wishes he were back in service."

He was talking about the waiter, but there was no doubt in my mind that he was actually reminiscing about his own career and using the other as an example to be held up for inspection; his own life was too involved to clarify his thoughts. His grace matched the other's as if they were both formed of the same mold and, from his conversation, I wondered if they both faced the like regret or whether it was only Mr. Torder who felt the pull of his former life. There was no answer to that as yet, and I quickly forgot the matter as I noticed the waiter's return with a steaming silver tray upon which many heaping plates vied for prominence. The fellow placed the food on the table and made several motions to wipe away imaginary food crumbs and give the impression of gracious dining. The performance was geared more for appreciation than for gratuities and I realized that they must have recognized a little of themselves in each other. The coffee was steaming, the sausages crisp-browned to a turn, and the aroma wafted up invitingly.

"This should prevent your rapid starvation," Mr. Torder said as he dismissed the waiter. "The fellow seems to

have been charmed by you, because unless I miss my guess, this is not the usual fare served to others. Would you like some coffee now?"

"Please, I should." I watched him while he poured the coffee. He was every bit the gentleman, the gallant officer, but he could also be crude and sinister when the mood took him. What a strange combination . . . or was there more to it that I wasn't seeing?

We talked little during the meal, but rather concentrated on the food and our previous embarrassment. I found my thoughts wandering far afield and was surprised when he stood up to hold my seat. He helped me to my feet and then we returned to our carriage and resumed our previous conversation where we had left off.

"You were saying that my father found a way to save your life?" I prodded him.

"Yes, for the second time; first in Mexico, then in Cuba. I'll not bore you with all the details, but I want you to understand that what your father did may never earn him a place in the history books because he did it for his men, not for publicity." There was bitterness in his narrative. "Our captor was an unsavory character who feared the retribution that would be his due when the Americans took the island, and he was using our miserable condition to force the Americans to grant his demands without opposition. Our degrading circumstances heightened his goals. He was totally deaf to any humanitarian pleas and our condition worsened by the minute." As he spoke his eyes reflected the pain and suffering he was describing and I wondered whether he would ever be completely human again—could he after what he had undergone?

"The major, your father, realized that unless something could be done we would perish. He set about

changing the circumstances although he was warned not to by Don Alvarez—that was the roach's name—and was tortured to emphasize that warning. He was taken from us. We lost all contact with him until our release, but we heard rumors while imprisoned that mustered our spirits and saved many of the men who otherwise would have given up hope. Somehow your father managed to persuade the roach's daughter to help us and that turned the tide in our favor; she convinced her father to treat us more humanely. We survived well enough. Your father wasn't quite as fortunate. When we were freed, we found him practically blind and starved to the point of emaciation." His hands gripped the chair arms tightly and resembled some bloodless glove. I could feel the horror of his story seep into my thoughts and my stomach knotted in terror. The father I had never seen was the hero of this tale, but a hero who was no longer the gay lieutenant, no longer the romantic figure I had constructed in my imagination. Rather he was some type of suffering martyr and that allowed me little comfort as I traveled into the unknown.

"You've stayed by him all these years then because of gratitude? I find that hard to believe." My words were out of my mouth before I realized what I was saying.

"Do you?" he said. "Miss Elizabeth, if it weren't for your father I would be dead, and that goes for the others in his command. He's blind because he tried to help us. It wasn't necessary for him to suffer his fate; he could have given his parole and avoided punishment. I owe him my sight!"

Why had I challenged his complete loyalty? My loose tongue had returned to us to our former positions, he the servant, I the visiting guest. The friendship I had hoped to gain seemed further then ever from my grasp and I had

to content myself with gazing out the window to occupy myself; he was silent, absolutely silent. The hours passed slowly.

"Albany, next stop . . . Albany." The conductor's voice rang through the car.

Mr. Torder turned towards me and said a trifle sharply, "We'll leave the train at Albany, so you'd better get ready. I'll attend to the baggage."

From his tone, I sensed that he was no longer hostile to me, merely annoyed at my babble. I'd have to keep a careful watch on my tongue or I'd antagonize everyone without meaning to—it was a problem that demanded my immediate attention.

"Mr. Torder, please forgive a foolish schoolgirl's prattling. I didn't mean to imply that you weren't loyal to my father; in fact, I don't know really know what I meant."

"It's forgotten, Miss Halsley," he said.

Forgotten then, not forgiven; I'd have to remember that. He'd called me "Miss Halsley" and that more than anything else defined my status. As far as he was concerned, I was my father's daughter, not his friend. His moods were sudden and unpredictable, but I had the impression that he was keeping a great deal from me and that I had caused him to regret his former offer of friendship. The thought frightened me.

The cold damp rain fell on the carriage top with depressing regularity, and the drumming of the stiff leather bonnet drowned out the sounds of the city's streets. We had been traveling in this manner ever since leaving the train, but as yet I still did not know our destination nor the reason for this side trip. I wanted to question Mr. Torder, but each time I resolved to begin, I had only to

look into his steel grey eyes to renounce my resolution and sink back into the soft leather upholstery to contemplate his unreachable attitude. When we had entered the carriage, he had given an address to the coachman in a voice too low for me to hear, but perhaps it was only my imagination that made me think he didn't want to admit where we were going.

The carriage stopped and the coachman pounded on the top to signal that we had reached our destination. Mr. Torder motioned me to remain seated and then opened the door and stepped down, disappearing into an old brick-and-shingle house that had obviously seen better days. My curiosity was piqued by his brusk demeanor. I craned my neck so that I could view the house and perhaps gain some clue as to why we had stopped here. I could see little but I managed to make out the wording of a small sign that was hanging from a stunted oak in front of the dilapidated driveway; it read "Dr. Moose, DDS." Why ever should we have come here and why the air of secrecy?

The door opened suddenly and Mr. Torder was revealed by flickering candlelight at his back. I could not see to whom he was talking, but his angry voice carried through the rain and resounded in the stuffy carriage.

"Blast the man! He was supposed to have it ready." He was furious and his voice sounded ominous. "You'd better warn him that we'll not be treated this way. If he knows what's good for him, he'll have it ready tonight." He slammed the door and returned to the carriage with a grimace of frustration still etched on his face. He gave another address to the coachman and reentered the cab. Once again the driver whipped the team into motion and we were underway.

"Mr. Torder, could you please tell me where we are

going and why we have left the train?" I asked with little hope of an answer.

"We're going to my sister's home," he said. "I've been commissioned by the major to bring him a package which won't be ready until later this evening, and so we shall bide the time in friendly surroundings. You need have no fears about my actions as I am merely following *his* orders."

"I've not questioned your actions or motives; why do you accuse me of it?" I was angry myself now, angry at his manner, angry at my own previous stupidity, angry at the fates for forcing this unfamiliar situation upon me.

"Have you not?" he said sarcastically.

I looked at him quickly, then looked away, for I couldn't bear to award him the triumph his words had won. I busied my thoughts by staring out the dripping window as the carriage passed through the weather-worn section and made its way along a stately tree-lined street which reminded me of the wealthier parts of my own township. The houses were well cared for and their formal gardens set them off as near-perfect jewels. The carriage pulled to a halt underneath an elegant porte-cochere and I knew that we had arrived.

Mr. Torder assisted me from the cab and then paid off the driver as I stood before a huge teak door that bore the legend, "Arthur Torder Esq." on a small but highly polished plaque; an angry boar's head knocker stared back at me with malevolent eyes. His hand reached in front of me and pounded with short demanding raps until I thought the door must surely splinter under the assault. The door opened slowly and I came face to face with a woman who clutched her throat and paled as she stared intently at my features with an incredulous look.

"My god! He thought you dead." She spoke in a frightened whisper and her voice held a note of rampant terror that she didn't bother to conceal. Hatred and fear masked her face.

Chapter Five

Her words struck at me with the force of a whip and I recoiled instinctively. I turned to run, but found myself being held in a tight grip, which loosened only after I calmed down sufficiently to ask Mr. Torder to release me. He did so immediately and turned to the woman standing in the doorway.

"Don't be ridiculous, Alice," he said "This is Miss *Elizabeth* Halsley, the major's *daughter*." He had emphasized my Christian name and stated my relationship to the major in such a way that I realized the woman must think me a ghost—a returning shade of my mother; that was the only explanation that fitted the facts. But why her expression of abject terror?

The woman seemed loath to believe so mundane an explanation, but finally gained control of herself and laughed to cover her embarrassment. "I'm afraid you gave me quite a fright for a moment." She held the door open as an invitation and motioned us into the cheery alcove.

"Miss Halsley, this is my sister, Miss Alice Torder." He made the introduction frostily and then continued. "Alice, there's no cause for you to gawk so; it's quite chilly in here and we could do with some hot food—see to it, will you?"

His sister reacted to his commands like a well-trained pet and rushed off to obey hurriedly. I felt my anger be-

gin to flow, but held it back, for the memory of his taunts still remained sharply painful. It was not my place to question his manners with his sister and I certainly did not want to resume our former quarrel. Nevertheless I felt his attitude domineering and my face reflected my thoughts.

"No doubt you think me obnoxious," he said haughtily, "but it was the only way to break the spell your entrance has put upon her." He watched me carefully. "Alice knew your mother quite well. Seeing you in the doorway, she thought—well, you know what she thought. Do you honestly think my actions so high-handed?"

"I suppose not," I replied, "but why was she so frightened?"

"A flight of fancy, I would imagine," he said. "Nothing more sinister, I assure you."

When she returned, Alice Torder seemed to have accepted my living presence and now went out of her way to show her good intentions by inviting me to freshen up in her room. She glanced quickly in his direction as she spoke and I noticed the frown he gave her. However, she was not to be put off by his moods and chattered about practically everything as she escorted me up the wide, curving marble balustrade to her bedroom. The door closed and her courage rose simultaneously.

"You did give me quite a start," she said breathlessly. "You resemble your mother perfectly and, seeing you so unexpectedly, I thought you were her. Of course, Arthur will be furious with me for what he terms my 'flights of fancy,' but you understand . . . don't you?" She was still frightened underneath her talkative manner and it was more than a spectre that was nourishing her fear.

"I do understand," I assured her, "but why should your

brother be so angry? I don't seem to be able to gain his confidence very well and I would like to understand why he feels so antagonistic towards me. You know the reason —I can see that you do—so please tell me, please!"

"Not now. Later," she said nervously, "when he goes out." Like a frightened little mouse, she left the room and I heard her rush down the steep stairwell. She had said, "later," but how could she know that we would have time to talk then, unless she knew more then I gave her credit for?

I now knew that my guardian was Mr. Arthur Torder Esq. and that this magnificent house belonged to him; the brass plaque told me that, but why then did he assume the duties of a servant to others? It all seemed incomprehensible to me. As I combed back the wisps of defiant hair, I turned over the facts in my mind. Torder owed his life to my father, but was that a strong enough bond for him to sacrifice his wealth and position? Somehow I doubted it; it wasn't quite in character for this strong-willed man. But then I knew so little about him that I could hardly make such a judgment. I'd have to await a further opportunity to question Alice. I was determined to question her whatever the cost.

I rejoined the Torders at the table and tried to present an appearance of absolute indifference to the previous incident, but I could not fail to notice that Alice kept staring at me, then at her brother, whenever she thought herself unobserved. The notion was taking root within me that there had been some connection between my mother and this strange man, but what connection could there have been that would frighten his sister so? Another puzzle, and one that I sensed was important to my future wellbeing at Haelstrom Manor. What was the secret and why did Alice have to wait until he was gone to

tell me? Fear had been my constant companion these last few days, but now it became my master.

The meal was over before I realized it. We had been served by a man whose appearance did little to settle my nerves, for his broken body matched his spirit—he cringed whenever Torder gave him some instructions. Finally, he placed a decanter of brandy on the table and disappeared into the scullery, no doubt relieved to be out of our company and away from the watchful eyes of his employer.

"Would you care for a brandy?" Torder said as he filled a crystal snifter with the smoky liquid. "It might relax you."

"No, thank you, Mr. Torder," I said, "I don't drink spirits."

He seemed to find my reply secretly amusing as he took a generous gulp from the glass by his elbow. His eyes glowed with some suppressed mirth, then became opaque as the bite of the liquor made itself felt. He was playing the part of the generous host, but I found myself disconcerted by the liberties he was taking with our relationship. Until we reached my father I was his ward, not some loose companion that he could entice with a brandy bottle. He had changed his mood once again and I found this attitude more disturbing than his former hostility. I tried to ignore him by concentrating my attention on his sister, but he was not to be excluded so easily.

"I would imagine that the trip has exhausted your flurry of questions, but if not," he paused and glared at his sister, "then I would appreciate it if you would direct them to me, not Alice. I won't have my sister used as a conspirator." The fury in his voice was unmistakable and its direction was towards me.

"I don't know what you mean!" I retorted.

"Don't you? I think that highly improbable." He turned to face his sister and I could plainly see the flush of anger on his features as he spoke in a cold emotionless tone. "Alice, if you could spare the time, there are several matters that I would like to discuss with you . . . now!"

"Certainly Arthur, but—"

"Miss Halsley, if you'll excuse us, Miguel will show you to the guest room where you can rest until we have to continue our trip." He gave me no time to reply, but called Miguel to him and spoke in rapid Spanish to the crouched caricature of a man, who then led me to an elegant though chilling room.

I was too upset by the events of the past hour to do more then allow myself to be shuttled off to this room. As the door closed, I felt the fear and disappointment of the yet uncompleted voyage overwhelm me and I sat down on the bed as if drugged. I was so tired, so incredibly tired, that before I realized it, I was fast asleep on the comforter. I awakened suddenly, my senses aware that something was amiss. I could hear voices raised in angry conversation and then what sounded like a door slamming. I decided to investigate, but when I tried to open the door, I found that I could not and I knew that what had awakened me was the sound of the key being turned in the lock. I was locked in my room like some naughty child. The fear that had been nagging at a corner of my mind now gushed forth unchecked. I wanted to pound on the thick door, but I knew that that would only infuriate Torder more and I didn't dare take that risk—not now.

There was nothing for me to do but return to bed. I lay on the flowered coverlet and tried to sort out the possible reasons for my being confined to this room. Had Torder heard me talking to his sister before and decided

to curtail our conversation because he feared what she might reveal? What could she possibly know that threatened him and why would she inform on her own brother? My suspicions seemed too ridiculous to consider seriously. But what other answer could there be for his locking me in this room?

The hours passed slowly, with little to lighten my dread of the coming trip. I found myself wondering what lay ahead of me at Haelstrom Manor; even the name brought shivers of worry down my spine. So far I had learned that my mother was far from the saint that I imagined and that my father was a heroic type who had suffered torture and was now practically blinded for his efforts: not precisely the picture I had painted in my longings. These thoughts whirled in my head until once again the merciful blanket of sleep covered me.

"Miss Halsley, my brother has returned and requests that you join him as soon as possible; you'll have to hurry if you're to make your train." It was some time later. At my door, Miss Torder spoke rapidly as if she were afraid to remain with me more than an instant.

"I shall be right down," I said, "and you can tell him that it was hardly necessary to lock me in this room."

"I don't understand . . . lock you in your room?" She seemed sincerely shocked.

"Never mind, I'll tell him myself. You said earlier that we could talk, but I suppose that's no longer possible now that he's returned." My words had hit the mark. "Thank you for your hospitality and perhaps someday we'll be able to meet under different circumstances."

She gave me a quick smile and hurried out of the room. I straightened my clothing and followed her down the long corridor, which was lined with portraits of military

men in dress uniforms, to where her brother was waiting for me impatiently. He seemed apprehensive and disturbed about something, but one glance at his face was enough to convince me that I should hold my tongue.

"Oh, there you are," he said. "We'll have to hurry if we're to catch the train." Strangely enough, his outward hostility seemed to have vanished and was replaced by an urgency that communicated itself to me as we made for the waiting carriage. I caught a last fleeting glimpse of Alice Torder as the carriage left the enclosure; then we were again on our way. The coachman must have been told to hurry, because I could hear the cracking of his whip as he spurred the team to greater effort. The swaying cab lent an aura of madcap melodrama to the whole affair. I avoided looking at Torder—the "Mr." had long since disappeared from my thoughts—and yet I felt his presence strongly. What power this man held over my mind I could only surmise, but I couldn't escape the feeling that he was somehow connected with my own childhood abandonment.

Our breakneck speed ended suddenly and I was thrown against Torder as the carriage came to an abrupt halt in front of the train. He reacted as if burned, then practically pushed me away from him as if I were contagious. Before I could regain my composure and ponder his behavior, he'd jumped from the cab and was removing the baggage from the rack above the rear wheels. I stepped down on the station platform and watched him. He handled the heavy bags as if they were stuffed with clouds as he handed them to a waiting porter. I could hear the whistle of the conductor as he called "all aboard" and the next instant I was being carried, or so it felt, aboard the railway car without benefit of ceremony. I was out of breath by the time we arrived at our compartment,

but thankful that we could finally rest without fear of missing the train.

The train started with a grinding squeal and howl that made me wince. I glanced at Torder, but he was too busy arranging the baggage to pay any attention to me, for which I was thankful. I preferred to continue our hastily arranged armistice that had prevailed throughout the wild carriage ride. I settled back in my seat and watched the trees blur past as the train increased its speed until at last we were out of the city and running along the broad fields of the upstate dairy area. The farmhouses and well-tended fields brought a twinge of homesickness to my throat as I tried to swallow the uncertain future ahead of me.

I watched the passing scene a while longer then turned to Torder, mildly surprised to find him by the door.

"I hope you find the compartment comfortable," he said. "I'll return when we've reached our destination. If you have need of anything, just ring the bell and the porter will take care of it. I shall be in the lounge car if there's anything that needs my attention. Goodnight, Miss Halsley."

I was too surprised by this turn of events to do anything but bid him good evening, after which he left me by myself to consider his strange behavior. Too many things had happened in too short a time, and my mind spun into a vortex of dark troubles beyond mortal ken. Questions demanded my attention, but I rapidly became immune to commands and had to fight a nameless terror that seemed to be dogging me with ragged dermination. There would be plenty of time for solutions—my whole life . . . my whole life . . . my whole life . . . !

"*Elizabeth, child . . . what have I done to you?*" Alicia spoke to me through the rumbling of the grinding

wheels, but her voice sounded muffled and sorrowfuly distant.

"It's not your fault, Aunt Alicia . . . not your fault," I answered.

"*Go back . . . go back . . . go back!*" The rhythm of her words matched that of the close webbed-ties that passed beneath us.

"Why?" I questioned frantically as she began to fade. "Why should I go back? Tell me, please tell me!"

"*No time . . . no time . . . no time . . . go back!*" The voice dissolved even as her image fluttered, then disappeared.

I must have been dozing, but she had seemed very real and lifelike in every detail. Ghosts don't exist, not in the twentieth century, but the shivers that racked my body made a liar of my convictions and destroyed my composure. Was it a warning from beyond the grave? Or was my overly active imagination using Aunt Alicia's form to speak to me directly? I'd spoken to her as if she were right before me, and she had seemed infinitely sad, not frightening as ghosts were reputed to be. But why had she appeared at all unless danger threatened? I wanted to call for Torder—he had said he would be near if anything demanded—but I didn't relish the thought of his intruding upon my inner fears. I was not yet ready to admit that the warning hadn't been genuine.

The scenery outside my window changed rapidly. The well-ordered fields gave way grudgingly to dark pine forests, which erupted on the hillsides, and to sweeps of rotting corn husks, which littered the ground with their empty corpses. Now and then, a dimly lighted farmhouse stood out among dismal clearings and I began to long for the rocky fields of my own county, which, though far from prosperous, were green and well-

tended. A pall hung over this area, a deathly plague that reached into my compartment and chilled me.

The knocking on the door seemed to be so much a part of my thundering imagination that at first I simply ignored it and continued gazing out the window, until at last it registered that someone wanted me to answer the summons. "Come in."

The compartment door opened on its oiled hinges and Torder stood framed in the doorway. "Miss Halsley, there's no time left and I think we had better talk." Was it his ominous "no time" that caused me to shrink from his invitation?

"Certainly, Mr. Torder," I said hesitantly. "Do come in."

He entered the comparment with a slight stagger, which I attributed to his sojourn in the lounge car, and seated himself opposite me. His face was slightly flushed and his voice slurred. His whole manner was somber, which surprised me, because his eyes twinkled with merriment. What did he find so amusing in the present situation? I didn't dare ask.

"Your father is not well," he said softly, all trace of laughter gone from his eyes. "You've been told of his blindness, but that's not the whole of it. He's blind in daylight, the result of his imprisonment in Cuba, but you might as well know that Cuba left a scar that goes deeper —a scar on his mind." He watched me intently to judge the effectiveness of his announcement. "You'll find him withdrawn and slightly suspicious of everybody. For his sake, bear with him until he can adjust to you. It won't be easy. You're liable to remind him painfully of your mother. Then too, she's not likely to welcome you to Haelstrom."

"She?" I asked. "I don't understand."

"Consuelo, your stepmother."

Stepmother? The word meant little to me, but Torder's tone brought visions of terror to my mind. Why did I detect a note of disgust in his voice? I was for the moment paralyzed, unable to ask the questions that must be asked if I were to find peace. I looked at Torder pleadingly. He seemed to understand my condition.

"Your father married Consuelo Alverez while we were in Cuba and brought her back to the manor after the war. She's his wife now, but that's not what I wanted to talk about." His delivery was straightforward, but there was definitely hatred in his voice. "He needs you, Elizabeth, needs someone to bring him back from the torture in his mind. I can't do it; I've tried."

"Mr. Torder, there's something you're not telling me. I have to know everything if I'm to help." I spoke truthfully and he knew it. Unless I was to be as blind as my father, I would have to know what obviously frightened Mr. Torder enough to make him withhold the whole truth.

"You're making an incorrect assumption, Miss Halsley. I'm not keeping any information from you. Why should I?"

Why should he, indeed? I didn't know, but his sudden reversion to his formal and distant demeanor assured me that something *was* hidden from me, out of his distrust. How could I convince him I was his friend when I had already begun to think of him as a sinister actor in a threatening melodrama? I wanted to reach out and tell him that he had nothing to fear from me, but his rigid control held me at bay. Perhaps I could draw him out by conversation; it was worth a try. "Mr. Torder, I don't want to argue with you, believe me. You mentioned the 'torture in his mind'—what does that mean? Is he

mad?" My question affected him in a way I could not have predicted. His answer carried me to the threshold of terror.

"I'm not sure, but I think he must be . . . must be." His thoughts turned inward and his halting speech was faintly tinged with wonder. "Things have happened that—" He stopped as if he had suddenly realized my presence.

"What things, Mr. Torder? Tell me!" I tried to break through his trance-like state, but only succeeded in driving him deeper into his own thoughts. Whatever they were, they were not pleasant. I could plainly see the thinly disguised horror that was chipping away at his self-control. I wanted to shake him and make him tell me everything, but I knew that to be impossible. If only he would trust me!

"There's evil there," he said. "Evil that spawns evil."

"I don't understand what you're taking about. Please tell me what has happened." My pleading tone failed to reach him. Facing the window, he continued his monologue as if I weren't there.

"Why? Why must he continue that way? He must realize what it's doing to him, but he doesn't seem to care any more, and that's not like him. Maybe it would have been better if he hadn't survived. No! I won't believe that; I can't." He was speaking from a vantage point that I could not comprehend, but his tone was chilling.

"Torder, what are you talking about? Please, please tell me so that I can help." As I spoke, I grabbed his trembling hand and tried desperately to involve him.

He suddenly snapped back to the present, his eyes boring into me, seeking I knew not what. His hands ceased trembling and his color returned. "Miss Halsley, you'll have to forgive me for being so obtuse, but it is

difficult for me to explain a situation that is to you little more than an exercise of the imagination. You will have to experience the life at Haelstrom Manor before I can possibly be of any assistance to you. Can you understand that?" His honesty was evident.

"No, I cannot, but I'm certain that you must have your reasons for saying that and I'll not dispute what I do not yet know." I attempted to be equally honest in the hope that he would be able to discern this and trust me more readily. "Is life at Haelstrom so different from what I am accustomed to?"

"Different? That is hardly the word to describe it." His voice was grim. "The manor house itself is not conducive to enjoyment. Perhaps, just perhaps, you may bring the necessary vitality to change that. You remember how frightening the carriage trip through the night was, don't you? Well, your aunt designed that trip so that you would be able to choose whether you desired to live at the manor or not." Yes, I knew the ride had been a test of my courage. "The house is kept in darkness so that your father can get about without having to rely on others, but you will find that he does not often leave his quarters and that has nothing to do with his eyesight. Your father has become something of a recluse.

"As for your stepmother, she may not welcome you, but don't let that destroy your youthful excitement. I'll not speak of her further as it is not my place to do so. But I'll give you this warning for what it's worth. Trust her only within your sight and then only halfway."

What a strange thing to say! For a moment I was strongly tempted to disregard it, but then I saw the pain and sorrow in his eyes and I paused to reconsider. Obviously he didn't care for Consuelo, but as yet I couldn't account for what I thought to be his deep hatred.

Did he hate her because she was Spanish and therefore his former enemy and jailer? Whatever the reasons, his manner of speech made me shudder. I was moving into a new world of uncertainty and the thought of having to face a hostile and dangerous stepmother didn't help to ease my fears.

"Ardsmore, Ardsmore next stop." The conductor's shrill voice broke in on my reverie and caused me to table it until later, when I should have more time.

"The train will be stopping soon so we had better hurry and prepare for the last leg of the trip." Torder dragged my heavy gladstone from the overhead rack and placed it in front of the door. He was a bundle of energy and I saw that any effects from the lounge car had long since worn off.

"Is it much further to the manor?" I asked.

"I suppose you might say that, but it is not so much the distance as it is the route we shall have to take. The manor is located on the very top of a high cliff and we will have to circle the cliff to ascend to the house." He sounded slightly disinterested, but still grim.

"You make it sound as if it were an eagle's nest." I tried to cheer his gloomy mood.

"You'll see it soon enough," he replied. "Then you can decide for yourself. I'll wager that you'll agree. In any case, nest or not, it's forbidding and that's no exaggeration. It was built for defense, not for beauty."

"Defense? What does that mean?"

"I thought that I had told you, but perhaps I'm mistaken. Haelstrom Manor was designed during the War of 1812 to hold a section of the Hudson free from attack by enemy shipping. Unfortunately, it was not fully completed when the attack came. After the war it was not considered worthwhile refurbishing, so it was sold to

your father's family. The outer ramparts still boast gaping gun ports and iron spikes to repel boarders, but once through the walls, you will find the house itself quite different. Though it was constructed for utility, it has an excellent view of the Hudson valley as well as natural gardens that have prospered in spite of neglect. I hope you will like it and that it will become your home—a happy home." For the first time he sounded warm and I responded to his well-wishing.

"Thank you, Mr. Torder," I said, "I hope that I shall be able to make it my home. I want you to know that I will try to make my father happy. He's all I have left in this world. I know this must sound quite strange to you, but as a child I would often daydream that my parents weren't truly dead at all, just sleeping. Now part of the dream has come true and I'll not ask for more than that."

"I hope all goes well for you and that your dream is answered happily. The train is slowing down now and we'd best leave the compartment and wait in the corridor. It won't stop for long and it's a bit of a race to clear it before it starts up again." His anger at the indignity of the race was mixed with his lightening mood so that the combination sounded faintly sporty.

"Ardsmore . . . this stop is Ardsmore." The conductor spoke the starting words and we raced to the door in slow motion.

We stood under the protecting eaves of the station-house until the train puffed slowly out of sight and only the mournful wailing whistle could be heard. I was not sorry to be free from its confinements, and yet for some reason I felt that my last ties with the world I knew were being shattered. I was on my own now, more than I had ever dreamed of being, and did not find that thought par-

ticularly comforting under the present circumstances. The weather did little to cheer me as it was a dull and rainy evening, but in spite of all the omens that had depressed me, I was still determined to face the future with hope.

We seemed to be waiting for some person to appear and I could sense that Torder was nervous. His head kept turning from side to side as if he were searching the roadway. Then he saw it and I did too. A small curricle was coming down the hill path with almost infinite caution. I wondered why its progress was so terribly slow. There were no obstructions in the roadway. Was the sight of the carriage picking its way so slowly, without cause, making Torder nervous? I didn't think so.

"Here's the carriage at last," he said irritably. "It doesn't look like much, but it will suffice." He spoke derisively, but I could detect his pride in its appearance—or was he proud only of the team of horses?

"The driver seems to be having some difficulty," I commented.

"I don't wonder," he declared. "The damn fool has the team mismatched. He's lucky they didn't pitch the curricle right off the cliff into the Hudson."

The carriage pulled to a halt before us. I could see the driver still shaking from the descent and possibly also from having to face Torder's anger. It was exceptionally difficult to see his face. He was very dark complexioned and a suit of flat black linen was pulled up around his shoulders. However, I could see that he was misshapen and very very old; He seemed to be the father of Miguel, Torder's servant.

Torder strode up and before I could comprehend what was happening pulled the old man from the carriage and

struck him across the face. The man cringed from the blows, but made no protest. I could not do the same and spoke up angrily.

"Torder, leave that poor creature alone," I yelled. "I will not allow you to mistreat him. Leave him alone this instant." I was furious.

"Miss Halsley, before you give any more commandments, you had best come here," he said with restrained wrath. "I frankly don't give a damn what you will or will not allow, but I will not have you yelling at me as if I were some lackey. Come here!"

The anger that should have repelled me drew me instead and I walked over to him meekly. I couldn't do anything else.

"You speak of maltreatment, but you hang the label on the wrong person," he said vehemently. "Look at this." He took me by the arm, led me to the snorting team, and directed me to look while he opened one horse's mouth. The horse was bleeding as if someone had taken a knife to its delicate tissues. I began to understand Torder's anger. I remembered how he had gentled my aunt's team on that horrible night. Why would anyone want to torture a horse in such a manner?

"That's what a Spanish bit does to a horse," he said. "Not a pleasant sight, is it? That misbegotten roach over there did this purposely to cause these animals pain and he did it against my orders. I've warned him before, but like most of his ilk, he enjoys torturing those that cannot fight. I will not have it. You commented on the slow passage of the team and now you can see the reason for it. Do you still think that I am without heart and want only to hurt others?"

The question struck deeply into my emotions. I realized that I had been pre-judging him with standards that did

not apply. In this incident, I had been completely in the wrong; was it possible that I was also mistaken about his attitude in the past? He was a complete enigma to me and I remained confused. Nevertheless, he deserved an answer. "It's my turn to apologize now, Mr. Torder," I said, "I was wrong and I admit it, but please don't think badly of me for my girlish foolishness."

He stared at me intently for an instant as if evaluating what I had just said, then turned and walked over to the chastised driver, to whom he spoke in hurried and angry tones. Then he turned back to face me. "You've never had the experience of this type of cruelty and so I'll forget about your outburst. Next time, think before you speak. To set the record straight, I am not a servant, merely a friend of your father's. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear, Mr. Torder," I said, "I won't make the same mistake twice, I assure you."

"We'll see. If you will come here, I will assist you into the curricle while Pedro puts your luggage into the back." He helped me into the creaking conveyance and waited until Pedro had done so. Then he entered and took the reins. His work finished, Pedro seated himself next to the suitcases and stared vacantly at the tracks behind us.

Torder spoke to the stamping team gently and the horses must have sensed that their return journey would be without pain, for they responded quickly to his commands. Within a few short minutes, we were practically flying along the blacktopped road towards the manor house and my future.

Haelstrom Manor stood before me and I stared at the foreboding outer walls with trepidation. Grey slabs piled upon each other gave the fortress the appearance of

a neglected mausoleum, which even the twining ivy deserted. The gaping parapets were separated like some toothless crone in the agony of trying to swallow an indigestible sweet and I could physically feel the terror that was blowing through the open casements. There seemed to be no wild life about, not even the sound of birds.

Our carriage was halted in front of an immense iron-studded wooden portal which I imagined must have been part of the original fortifications, because it was fire-blackened and marred by numerous bullet holes. The door completely hid the manor house from view. I was anxious to see beyond it, and my nervousness was echoed by Torder, who seemed to be awaiting some signal from within before approaching closer. Finally, the huge wooden slabs folded inward and the curricle leaped forward with dispatch. The doors closed behind us with an eerie groan, but I could not see who had manipulated them nor how it had been done so quickly. It was strange and somehow discomforting.

The manor house's dim lights broke the night's blackness, but the house seemed to remain part of the eerie landscape. I strained my eyes trying to make out its features, but only gave myself a slight headache and a feeling of alienation from this deadening scene.

Torder got down from the carriage and held out his arm to me so that I could descend. I held back for an instant as I felt that to step down would determine whether or not I would live here happily, but the pause merely confused me further. This was to be my home; my father was here. With that thought, I allowed Torder to help me. He had sensed my hesitation and smiled pleasantly to lessen my swirling doubts. Torder was a strange man, who could be gentle one instant, angry the

next, both friendly and withdrawn. I felt he would be my friend if his inner turmoil would permit him, and that thought helped. He spoke to reassure me.

"Miss Halsley, you've been through a difficult time and I've done precious little to relieve that situation, but please realize that I am deeply involved in matters as yet shapeless to you. If I have seemed offensive at times, I hope you will understand that my anger was directed rather at a person who no longer exists. Forgive me for all the trouble I have caused you." His speech was once again out of character, but I warmed to his effort to appease my fright.

"Thank you, Mr. Torder," I said, "but the fault has not been entirely yours; I am also greatly to blame for any unpleasantness. I hope that I will see more of you now that the journey is over."

"That's quite unlikely, Miss Halsley," he retorted. "I do not often spend time at the manor. I content myself with other matters. However, I will see you occasionally and shall do my level best to help you." I thought his offer, since unsolicited, valuable and sincere.

"Thank you again," I said, "I hope I shall not need your help."

"I hope it isn't necessary, but the offer still stands." His words indicated that he thought otherwise.

Our conversation must have alerted someone within the manor house, because the door opened suddenly and a sharp ledge of light made me stiffen. I noticed that Torder was affected in the same manner; his body tensed and he seemed about to turn and disappear into the night. However, he controlled this impulse and again held out his arm to me in moral support as we entered.

The interior was, if anything, even stranger than the outer wall. Neglected and run down, the reception al-

cove showed the same disregard of esthetics; I wondered whether it had been in fact part of the uncompleted foundations when the defenses were breached; it seemed so. The ceiling was at least twenty feet high. Its sharpened arch threw broken and elongated shadows across my path as I followed Torder into a hall. Once again, I did not notice who had opened the door, but this time I could hear footsteps preceding us and that comforted me a bit.

"It's a bit disconcerting at first, but you'll soon get used to their ways." Torder spoke softly.

"I suppose you mean the servants," I said. "But how can they move so quietly and without being seen?"

"They're used to it. You see, most of the servants are former jailers or inmates of the Cuban prison in which we spent our terms. That probably surprises you, but it was your father's idea and I'm certain that he had his purpose in hiring them. They're a sorry lot, but don't let them get you down." He said this in a somber tone that blended with the house's interior and with my own impressions.

The massive supporting pillars now shortened themselves as if the effort to uphold the weighty ceiling was no longer worth the strain. The total effect was one of depression. Stone stacked upon stone without a break of color to accent their blackened faces made me wonder why anyone would want to remain in this dismal setting. Perhaps the rest of the manor differed from this penal section. Surely it must.

"Mr. Torder, is the rest of the manor this neglected?" I whispered the question as if only a whisper would be proper in this seclusion.

"It needn't be, but it is," he said.

"Why?"

"Your father is unaware of its décor," he answered. "His eyesight is too poor to notice the decay. Now that you're here, you can certainly make the necessary changes. Go slowly at first. A dash of color might just be what your father needs to break his seclusion."

"I can understand why my father doesn't realize the lack," I said, "but why doesn't my stepmother do something about it? Surely, she couldn't like this gloom."

The changeable Mr. Torder changed once again and the result was frightening. His features contorted with a rage that threatened to envelop me. "You'll have to ask her about that," he said icily. "I have nothing to do with her other than when it is absolutely necessary. Miss Halsley, if you'll permit me, I'll locate your father and bring him to you. It would be best if you remained here until we return. The house is unfamiliar to you and may prove dangerous if you try to explore."

"Dangerous? How could it be dangerous?" I asked.

"There are still sections that have yet to be completed and the lighting is poor. You might not see a crevice until you were right over it. Stay here. I'll return in just a few moments." His tone was firm. He went off to locate my father knowing that I would follow his orders.

As he departed, I wanted to shout for him to come back. Fears attacked me. My pulse raced and I was unable to quiet my pounding heart, for a tangible evil seemed to lurk in the house's shadows. Ridiculous, of course, but the evil scent exuded from the walls and reflected onto the darkened panes of thickly leaded glass which served as windows in the hall. It was like being imprisoned in a dungeon with an unknown and deadly inmate who was also unseeable.

I looked around, trying to focus my attention on something that would uplift my plummeting spirits, but the

room was bare. Only the walls and curving arches were visible. Yet I could feel someone or something staring at my back. Someone was in this room, I couldn't be mistaken; but where could a person hide? The hairs at the back of my neck started to rise and a cold terror began to knot in my stomach as I slowly turned to face eyes that bored into my back with hatred. It was a hatred I could fully sense, but my throbbing heart warned me that I must try to control my fears or be consumed by them. There was no one behind me. Yet the taint of evil still hung in the air.

"I tell you she is your daughter; she couldn't possibly be an imposter." It was Torder's voice, but its meaning and location were unknown to me.

"What makes you so sure, lieutenant?" Whose voice was that? It must be my father's; it must be.

"You'll know the moment you see her," Torder said. "She looks just like her mother did when she was her age. The resemblance is unmistakable. But don't be fooled. It goes no further than that. I can tell you that she's entirely different. She's your daughter, major, don't forget that."

"You need hardly remind me, lieutenant. I am quite capable of making my own decisions." The voice ceased its indignant tone. "Did you bring the package?"

"For God's sake, major," Torder said, "is that all you can think of when your daughter is waiting for you? Isn't there anything left of your self-respect?"

"You overstep yourself, lieutenant, and I'll not have it. Do you hear me? I won't have it." My father's voice grew shrill.

"As you like," said Torder. "I'll not intrude any longer, if that's your wish."

The declaration of Torder's intent seemed to have a quieting effect on my father and his next words were

more in keeping with his contrite station. "Torder, forgive me for being such a perfect fool. I don't know what's come over me, but I seem to be snapping at everyone and that's unforgivable of me. That's a contradiction in terms, but I believe you know what I mean."

"I forgive you, major," Torder said, "but I wonder whether you'll ever be able to forgive yourself."

"I try. God knows I try, but I can't alter the past." His voice tried to remain strong, but the effect was one of almost pathetic begging.

"George, the past is over and done with and the present demands your attention." Torder's words sounded like an adult abjuring a child against the ultimate darkness. "Your daughter is waiting for you and that's your future; it can erase the past if you'll let it. Shall we join her now?"

"Help me, Torder," my father said. "I'm afraid to face her alone. If she rejects me, then the circle is complete and I'm finished. Help me, please."

I could hear the voices drawing near, but I could not make out where they were coming from because the corridors threw the sound around and only the hollow echoes reached me. I tried not to dwell on the strange overheard conversation, but I could not avoid thinking about what my father had said last. To reject him was to finish him. What was the real meaning behind that statement? He had also questioned my authenticity, but that was understandable in view of the long and strange separation. Or was it? He had sent for me, then tried to ignore me, which was indeed strange. My mind kept drawing from a well of fear. I realized that it was probably simple nervousness on both our parts that was causing this alienation. How could I overcome this? I knew only that I had to.

I could now hear two sets of footsteps coming from the

direction of a far wall that was completely shaded in darkness by huge supporting pillars. With the manor house unlit, it was impossible to see someone before he was right next to you and that thought made me shiver somewhat. It perhaps explained why I could not locate whoever it was that was staring at my back.

The two men entered my line of vision together and I could plainly see that Torder was supporting my father with an arm under his shoulders. Even though I had heard that my father was blind, the sight of him being assisted shocked me. He looked as if he could not exist without Torder's support. The two came closer.

"Miss Elizabeth Halsley," said Torder with great ceremony, "this is your father, Major George Halsley."

For an instant, I was tempted to curtsy, but then the reality of the situation dawned on me and I moved to embrace my father. I moved one step closer and he retreated two.

"It's not possible!" My father practically shouted this as he turned away from me to face Torder. "Is this some trick of yours, some revenge?"

Torder reacted as if he had been slapped across the face and for a moment, I thought that my father really would slap him. With a pained look, Torder finally gained control of himself and answered. "Don't be a fool. You know better than that. She's your only child. It's about time you realized that and acted like a father. She's been through too much in these last few days to have to put up with this ludicrous performance."

"Torder, how dare you say that?" I jumped to my father's defense without a clear reason. "You've bullied me, but you've no right to bully him." I could not see my father's face clearly, but I sensed that my words had restored his dignity.

"Miss Halsley, I must ask you to pardon my brutish behavior. Mr. Torder was only acting in the capacity of a close and dear friend and not, as you imagined, my censor. Without Torder, I should be completely lost. That's the truth of the matter. I hope you will overlook any past unpleasantness for my sake." My father said this with utmost sincerity, but I noticed a quick exchange between the two men. Their looks did not spell friendship.

"I think I'd best be leaving now," said Torder stiffly. "I bid you good evening, Miss Halsley, and a pleasant stay at Haelstrom. Goodnight, major."

"Goodnight, Torder, and thank you again." My father said this perfunctorily and Torder took it that way. He left quietly.

I watched him depart and thought about the way my father had addressed me. He had called me *Miss Halsley*, not Elizabeth, nor daughter, nor any endearment whatever. Was I to be given the usual guest treatment, and then disregarded? I had expected any of several reactions, but not cold and gallant formality. I was caught unawares. Should I address him as major, father, or—as Torder had—Mr. Halsley? It seemed ridiculous to call my father anything but father and I resolved to do just that, no matter what the consequences.

"You must be exhausted after your long journey, Miss Halsley," he said, "and you can no doubt do with a rest. I'll ring for the maid and have her show you to your room." He started for the bell pull, but my words stopped him in his tracks.

"Father, you can't shrug me off like some unwelcome guest," I said vehemently. "You're my father and my whole life. I've no one else left. If you don't want me to stay here, then say so and I'll leave. I want to love you,

be with you, but you must give me the chance or else we're finished before we start. Let me love you. Please!"

A full minute of silence followed my plea while his face reflected the turmoil that was raging within him. For twenty years he had thought himself childless. Now he was being called upon to accept my presence and so deny his previous belief. In one minute, he had to make the decision that other men seldom had to face and then only with months of preparation to cushion the shock. I was born, raised, and grown within the space of a few heartbeats. Now, if he could, he had to adjust to me as his daughter.

Could he in such a short time? His next words would tell.

Chapter Six

"Elizabeth, I am sorry for treating you like a stranger, but I have only just begun to feel even that you are in my house. Surely you can understand and spare me some compassion." My father, Major George Halsley, drew himself erect before me. "Twenty years have been taken from our lives together, but I'll not give up a moment more. Will you stay with me?"

"Yes, father, I'll stay," I said positively. "I'll stay as long as you want me to." It was a short but apparently the right declaration to make, because my father smiled and drew me into his arms.

"Beth, my dearest Beth, for too long I've denied myself the pleasure of having you by me," he said. "I know now what a complete fool I was." He held me still closer and I could feel the shivers running through his arms.

"Father, I've learned that you couldn't have known about my birth," I wept, "so please don't blame yourself; it wouldn't be fair. I'm here now and that's what matters."

My father held me at arm's length and gazed at me. Any doubts I may still have had vanished when he spoke next.

"You're the image of your mother. That's a high compliment to pay because she was indeed beautiful. But most of all, you are my daughter. I haven't the words to express what that means to me and I lack the grace to

show it, but believe me, Beth, I do love and need you." His voice was extremely soft, at the end almost a whisper.

"I know, father," I said, "I can feel it."

"Beth," he said hesitantly, "I'm a man whose whole adult life has been spent in ceremonies and drill, but for the first time in many years, I find my thoughts and actions but blundering attempts to disguise my confusion. There are many things I want to tell you, many questions I want to ask. But if we're to talk sensibly, we need to follow the dictates of our mind and rest. You've been too long without the security of sleep. I'm not casting you off; I'm begging you to let me take the responsibility of being your father. We'll talk tomorrow when you awaken."

"You're right," I said. "I do need sleep."

He walked slowly over to the nearby wall and tugged sharply at a hanging bell cord three times; then he returned to my side. He needed no support this time and that cheered me greatly. He was too proud a man to accept support easily.

"Elizabeth, before the maid comes to show you to your room," he said, "there's one question that I would like to ask you." He paused. "Did your mother ever speak of me?"

"I don't know, father," I replied. "I never knew her. She died the night I was born." As he'd put his question, his face had formed a kaleidoscope of passing emotions: love, fear, hate and others that I could not identify, but my answer let him relax. Quite obviously, he wasn't aware of the full circumstances. I remembered the letter that Mr. Simms had placed in my keeping for my father. Possibly it accounted for all that happened in our twenty

years of separation. I found it in my small tapestry bag and handed it over.

"Aunty's solicitor asked me to give you this letter," I said. "I'm sorry—I should have given it to you before."

He looked at me and smiled gently. "We both seem to be apologizing without pause, but I trust that will change when we've grown to know one another better."

The letter remained unopened in my father's hand, for he seemed to hear the sound of hurrying feet. I was surprised that I could not detect them as soon as he, but then I remembered that nature often endows the blind with a sharpened sense of hearing. A second later the maid appeared.

I had expected a dark lithe woman to answer the call, but the girl who curtsied before my father was, if anything, the exact opposite. She was flame-headed, pert, and nervously awkward in a humorous way. Her voice gushed out merrily.

"Cook says you'll be wanting me," she said breathlessly, "but with *herself*, there's no way of knowing for sure. She'd forever hearing bells and running me ragged looking for the hand that's rung them. I'm not complaining, mind you, but sometimes it wears a bit thin. However, that's not what you'll be wanting me for and I do wag on. How can I serve you, sir?"

My father was taken aback by her whimsical manner and showed his momentary confusion by clasping and unclasping his hands rapidly behind his back. He clearly was out of his element here and I stepped in to rescue him from what he must have fancied was a chattering banshee.

"From the sound of your lilt," I said, "you're from Ireland and but recently arrived." She looked at me in amazement. "Are you from Dublin?"

"Aye, I am," she said perkily. "How would you be knowing that?" Her question as completely natural, but her voice held a note that was preciously close to respect.

"It's the only city there whose name I can remember," I said honestly. "I know very little about Ireland, but I've read that it is beautifully green and charming. Perhaps you can tell me more about it; I'd like that."

My father listened to our conversation, every now and then a smile breaking through his otherwise stern appearance. He came close to me and took my hand. "Bridget, show my daughter to her room and help her with anything she needs; she's precious to me, so take care." He spoke to Bridget gently and ended his orders with, "Please." She curtsied to him again and bade me wait until she returned with a lit candle. As soon as she had gone, my father turned to me. "Sleep well and peacefully, child—you're home."

I felt that now. Haelstrom Manor was my home, but my home was not the manor; it was my father's love.

Bridget returned with an immense candle in her hand, the light of which made my father wince slightly. In darkness, he could discern the hidden footfalls and crevices, but light darkened his sight so that he staggered as if in pain; this was the reason he kept the manor house dim. It was then that I fully understood the reason for the strange funeral rites that I had undergone at my aunt's request. She knew that my life was to be spent in this unnatural dark and she had arranged the carriage ride to see if I could maintain my courage amid such obstacles. I had passed the test; I would continue to do so.

"If you'll be following me," Bridget said, "I'll be showing you to your bedroom. Best stay close, though, or you'll be tripping over your feet; the way's treacher-

ous." She said the "treacherous" as if she also felt the presence of evil here.

"I'll follow right behind you," I said. "Goodnight, father, and sleep well."

"I will, now that you've come." He spoke softly and lovingly to me, then turned and strode through the archway.

"Lead on, Bridget," I said.

"Aye, mum," she answered, "here we go."

I was extremely overtired and perhaps that accounted for the continuing feeling of being watched. Whatever the cause, I knew that someone was glaring at me with cold, methodical hatred. I resisted the temptation to look over my shoulder because I knew that only a blank wall would be the reward. The spy was hidden from my view. I kept telling myself that it was all in my imagination, but I could not escape the burning sensation that seared my thoughts and prickled my nerves.

Bridget led the way up a narrow winding staircase, her candle's flickering circle of light bobbing before me as I trailed her closely. I had not realized the height of the staircase before, but as we reached the first small landing and continued climbing, I saw that the manor was far larger then it had appeared from the outside. I was puffing when we finally reached the floor above and I could see that Bridget was in the same condition. She stopped in front of an austere ebony door and waited for me to catch my breath.

"It's a sinful climb when you're not used to it," she said, "but then it's the same later." She smiled and the added lilt in her voice tended to vanquish the dark fears that lurked in the air.

"I certainly did not expect so great a climb. From the

outside, the manor seems deceptively smaller. I wonder why?" I put the question half to myself, but Bridget must have long wrestled with the same puzzle and she answered me.

"Its baffling right enough when you enter through the main hall, but when it's light outside you can see that the manor's built on several different levels. We're towards the back, facing the ocean, so naturally we're higher up than we would be on the other side." She paused for a moment so that I would be properly impressed with her figuring; then she cocked her head to one side and winked. "I'll not be taking credit for what is not mine; the gatekeeper's son told me that. Howsomever, it seems right enough to me. You'll soon be knowing more about such things than me."

I was doubly flattered: first, that she wanted to be completely honest with me, and second, that she endowed me with her respect. She seemed bubbly, and, yes, impish as well, which made me feel welcome in these cold surroundings. I watched as she drew out an iron key ring and selected one from a large assortment. She placed the key in the antique lock and twisted once; the door opened with a groan and we entered together.

I stood in the doorway amazed. The room was immense. The candle's glow hardly reached the far wall, but my keenest interest was held by the translucent panes of glass that were imbedded in the oddest window frame I had ever seen. The window was elliptical, and the frame was secured to the wall with huge iron hinges. The moon had chosen to enclose itself within the flattened circle. The sight was breathtaking. The manor's builder had chosen his shapes well and the moonlight, playing on the canopied bed in the center of the room, seemed to wash it in silvery tints.

"I don't suppose that Pedro brought up your luggage yet," she said in mild reproof, "but then he's a queer one and he well may have; I'll check." She walked over to the bed and held up the coverlet. The luggage was there beneath the bed, neatly arranged. Bridget grunted, "Just as well, I'd not like to face him without there being another door to leave by."

How strange that she should say that as the thought was in my mind too. I could still remember that gnome-like man with his cruel leer and I did not welcome the prospect of having him near me in the dark. Somehow he seemed part of the evil that was watching me. I decided to tell Bridget about some of my feelings and perhaps learn something in return.

"Bridget, I'm not usually one to be frightened by tales of ghosts and goblins, but I can feel evil here and I think you feel it also; am I being foolish?" I tried to cover my disquiet with a smile, but she saw through my masquerade and replied in a solemn tone.

"If it's foolish you're being," she said, "then I'm part and party to it. I feel it in me bones and that's no lie, but it's uncommon hard to put your finger on it as it's slippery and wickedly quick." Her face darkened for a moment, but her buoyant nature soon overcame the cloud and she smiled again. "Ach, Bridget O'Mara, you'll be digging up all the ghosts in America with your foolish blather and then what?" She queried herself humorously. "Then you'll be swimming back to Ireland with all the furies after you; so you'd best leave them rest." Her monologue finished, she lifted one of the trunks and placed it on the bed.

"You needn't do that," I said. "There'll be plenty of time for unpacking in the morning. You must be tired yourself."

"If it's all right with you, mum, I'd just as soon get you unpacked and settled in because you're liable to be busy on the morrow. Besides, those were my orders from Himself." Her words trilled forth.

"Himself?" I asked. "I don't understand."

"The major, your father," she said. "Himself is my way of saying the master. I'll have to be learning to speak properly if I'm to stay here, but it's terrible difficult when there's few that speak the language at all."

"Surely not all the servants are without English." My statement was more of a question.

"Besides cook and the gatekeeper," she said, "there's only myself and Sean, the keeper's son; the rest know hardly a word. That's four in twenty."

"I see there's a great deal that I don't know about the manor," I admitted ruefully. "Tell me, are you over from the Emerald Isle long?" She positively beamed when I mentioned the name I had remembered from my classes in geography.

"Three months," she said, "and two of them starving while looking for honest work. If it wasn't for Mr. Torder, I don't know what would have become of me, and that's for certain sure. It was he who found me and brought me to work at the manor."

"I've met Mr. Torder," I said thoughtfully, "but I wouldn't have thought he was one to befriend a young woman. Perhaps I have mistaken his character." Another piece in the puzzle of Torder, but not one that fit as yet.

"He's a fine man, but he'll not be showing it while the *dark one's* in his thoughts. I'll not be saying that I understand him, but I'll be stating proudly that he's been a friend to me and I to him." Her voice made it clear that she would brook no disparagement of Mr. Torder.

"The *dark one?*" I questioned.

Her smile turned to a frightened wariness. "It's me big mouth that's to be me downfall and that's for sure. It's not me place to be speaking about your mother that way and I'm sorry for having offended you with my sharp tongue."

"She's not my mother, Bridget," I said. "She's my stepmother. Why do you call her the dark one?"

When I told her that Consuelo was my stepmother, she seemed to relax and a bit of her smile returned. "I'll not be saying that she's in league with the devil, but it's certain that she's overly fond of his satanic ways. She's a devious one and you'll soon be seeing that, but I'd best be swallowing my words."

"I'll not repeat them, Bridget," I said. "I've never met the woman, though I expected to see her when I arrived. Perhaps we'd better get on with the unpacking so that you can get to sleep."

I handed Bridget the key to my trunk and watched while she opened the leather lid with a particularly efficient motion that I had always envied in others. The lid cracked wide and revealed an assortment of cloaks and dresses that I had purchased in anticipation of returning to Vermont after graduation, but had never found the chance to wear. I had forgotten that they were packed and the sight of them reminded me of the recent past. The dresses had an entirely different effect upon Bridget: she stared at the display with open-mouthed amazement. It was obvious that such clothing had filled her dreams with a longing she had never been able to satisfy.

Her eyes were sparkling as she turned to me. "Oh my! I've never seen anything so fine," she said. "It must be wonderful to have such finery."

Her enthusiasm made me want to play Santa Claus and give her the toys she desired. Her figure was nearly

identical to my own and so I held up the cloak and offered it to her. "It's yours, Bridget," I said. "You can call it a gift of friendship."

"No, mum, I couldn't take anything so grand. I'm thanking you, but I've never owned so beautiful a cloak and it's too rich for the likes of Sean." She spoke with both joy and sorrow, and I realized that she was quite right. How could I offer it to her so that she would not have to feel above her station?

"Bridget, you'd be doing me a favor if you felt free to wear this cloak whenever you wanted to. I really mean that." I spoke softly and I could see that I had solved her dilemma.

"Thank you, mum," she said, "I'll be doing just that if it means that we're to be friends."

She managed to unpack and hang up the clothing in a large closet with a speed and completeness that I could only wonder at. Her hands seemed to fly over the trunk and float the clothing into its proper place; only the blue velvet cloak held her up for an instant, then it too joined the others in the closet. The empty trunk was put under the bed and the coverlet pulled back so that the bed was ready for the night.

Bridget relit her small candle and stood in the doorway. "I'll be bidding you goodnight, Miss Halsley," she said. "If you need anything at all, you can ring."

"Goodnight, Bridget," I said, "and thank you for your help."

"Thank you, mum." She closed the heavy door behind her. Her leaving seemed to throw a pall over the room. I knew that my long journey had finally ended—I was home.

I undressed quickly, scarcely bothering in my exhaustion to hang up my traveling costume, then got under

the covers. The silver candelabrum by my bedside flickered weird shadows on the wall; they seemed to be cast from some misshapen claw reaching out of the darkness for me. The room was alive with scurrying shapes, each one a distorted image of the other and each watching me. I could not welcome the darkness, but to erase the phantoms, I blew out the candles and lay in the dark.

So many things had happened in the past week that my brain could no longer clarify the individual incidents. I was left with only a patternless gloom to consider. My father wanted me here, I knew that, but why the sensation of evil that permeated every brick in this strange house? Where was it coming from and why was it directed towards me? Questions that I could not answer pursued others that I dared not contemplate and the result approached terror. I could feel a malignance searching for me, but I could do nothing to protect myself.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I awakened the moon was no longer framed within the window; the room was in absolute darkness. Something had startled me from my troubled sleep, but what could it have been? I looked around the room carefully, searching for some clue, then suddenly realized that the window was partially open and swinging in the wind. The heavy frame was knocking against the stone wall and the hollow booming sound struck fear in my pounding heart. The room was cold and the bracing air cleared my head of previous dreams and fancies, so that I sat up sharply. The window had been firmly secured when I went to sleep. How had it opened? I knew I would have to solve the mystery before I could again rest undisturbed.

I got out of bed and shuffled into my slippers. The floor was icy cold, which made me shiver slightly, but finally I managed to light the candle and amble in the

warm glow to the window. I stood before the gaping frame and looked down onto sharp granite rocks which reared their grasping heads from out of a foaming sea bath and gleamed with a reflected hunger. They were so far below, and I so high above, that for an instant I felt a dizziness that threatened my balance—and my life. The rocks spoke to each other with a growling noise, venting their wrath on the wind.

I drew back from the brink, but watched the scene below with almost hypnotic compulsion. I was unable to take my eyes off the crashing waves or the rending granite claws, unable to obey the inner commands of my mind to withdraw; only the eternal battle below held my attention—that and the wavering candle held in my hand.

The flaming spear of light, feeding off the blackened wick, blazed upward fiercely, then leaped forward to embrace the opened window. The sight froze me for its meaning was clear. Somewhere behind me a door had opened and was blowing the flame forward. I had started to turn when, without warning, I felt two hands grip my shoulders and try to push me out the window. The candle's flame, which had alerted me, puffed out as I was thrown headlong towards the beckoning void, but in that deadly instant, I managed to hang onto a protruding hinge and break my fall. The candle fared worse and plunged out the window to begin its spiraling descent to the rocks below—a journey that I had narrowly avoided myself. The suddenness of the attack, and the deathly aspects of it, curtained my thoughts with the confusion of shock and I slumped to the floor in a faint.

I opened my eyes a second later to find myself in a tumbled heap just beneath the window frame—a closed window frame with the panes of leaded glass firmly secured by a large wrought-iron bolt. The window was

closed, yet surely it had been open; someone had closed it. My thoughts chased each other around the curving path of my mind, but no answers presented themselves and even the questions were unsure.

I glanced around the room quickly, fearing a reappearance of my attacker, who I now felt certain had departed after an unsuccessful attempt on my life. But the room was empty. Who had tried to send me to my death through the window and why? Or had I imagined it? I wanted to pass the whole incident off as a bad dream formulated by the uncertainties which beset me, but one unmistakable reality remained—the candle was gone from the room.

I groped my way to the door, barely managing to avoid the edges of the unseen furniture, only to find it closed, with the key still in the inside lock just as I'd turned it before I went to bed. How then did my assailant enter and how did he leave the room? If I'd imagined the whole thing—it seemed the only answer—what had happened to the candle? The candle was real; I had felt its heat and enjoyed its warm glow. So the window *must* have been opened. Though it was closed now, and my assailant vanished, terror remained very much with me and made me listen to every sound of the manor house with apprehension. Someone was outside my room!

I turned the key slowly so as to make no sound, then opened the door a crack. The hallway was darkened, but my eyes were now adjusted to the gloom and I could make out the arched corridor that passed by my bedroom. I had heard footsteps outside my door. They had paused, then continued on their way, and, though I was afraid, I was determined to track down their source. I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. There was definitely someone in the corridor ahead of me; I

could detect the sound of heavy breathing. But the footsteps had halted and the person remained in the shadows. I braced myself for a long wait for I would not move until I spotted my suspect. I could feel my pulse racing and I wanted to run from the evil that had tried to kill me. I would not run; I would not!

The shadows, which blended into the prevailing blackness, suddenly separated and I could discern the figure of a man making his way along the corridor. Although the darkness was almost complete, the figure seemed to have no difficulty in avoiding the ever-present pitfalls, but rather progressed as if it were broad daylight. The figure was my *father!* It had to be! But why would he want to kill me? *Why?*

Chapter Seven

THERE COULD be no doubt that my father, the man who just hours before had welcomed me to my new home, had tried to murder me. The very thought sickened me, but I knew that I would have to follow it to its logical conclusion or else give up all hope of ever knowing a peaceful night's sleep again. The figure—no, my father—turned off the main corridor and was rapidly lost from my sight as he stalked into the void. The memory of his unfettered travel through the dark hall taunted me as I returned to my room. Who else could walk that maze without difficulty?

I stopped in front of my door as if afraid to return to the stage of horror on which I had narrowly avoided destruction. Only the need to think the matter through made me enter the bedroom. I had remembered to take a candle from a sconce in the hallway, which I lit and fastened to my commode, using the dripping wax to seal it to the aged wood. The candle's glow was a great comfort to me. I watched the pure flame dispel the lurking blackness with its shield of bright cheer. I seated myself on the bed and allowed the incidents of the past few hours to parade before me, each adding to the general whole and marching my thoughts towards uncertainty. The facts were simple, but contradictory. Someone had entered my room in the middle of the night, opened the

window, tried to push me to my death, then closed that same window and disappeared—through a door locked from the inside. It seemed impossible, yet I knew that it had happened; how, I did not know.

The candle! That was the clue that I was overlooking. The candle's flame had been blown forward, which meant that the opening had to be directly behind me. But the doorway was at a *right angle* from the window! Whoever had tried to push me had entered from some other doorway not known to me—perhaps a secret passage in the wall. That was it. It had to be. Where was the passageway located and who had entered?

I rose to my feet quickly and began a thorough search of the room. Every cabinet, bookcase, and closet were gone through minutely, but if there was an entrance, I was unable to locate it. It must be here somewhere! I felt that I shouldn't be able to sleep until I found it, but the night's anxiety took its toll upon me and I found myself going through the room in a daze. It was no use searching further until my head was clear and so I returned to bed. Sleep came rapidly.

I awoke to find the sun shining in on me through the window and the sight of that warm caressing light lifted my spirits. The night's horror now seemed distant, more nightmarish than realistic. It was too beautiful a day to retrace its frightening path and I found myself responding to the day's promise of golden splendor. Today was my first at Haelstrom Manor. I was determined to make it an enjoyable one—one that would build up my spirits for the night to come. I rose quickly and slid my feet into the fur-lined slippers which awaited me under the bed, as the floor was still cold and chilling. I was washed and dressed by the time I heard a knocking at the door. I

unlocked it and found a shining-faced Bridget staring at me in surprise.

"I was just about to wake you," she bubbled, "but you've beat me to it. Now that's a wonder for sure."

"Not really," I said. "I'm a farm girl myself and it seems ridiculous to waste the best part of the day in bed. Besides, it seems like a beautiful day."

"It does that," she agreed pleasantly.

"Tell me, Bridget," I questioned, "will breakfast be ready soon? I'm famished." It was so. I was truly hungry. That certainly was a strange reaction after the night's incident, but perhaps this smiling friendly girl had brought back to me a sense of security. Her jolly nature seemed to sweep away all unpleasantness.

"You've no worries about that, mum. Herself's been up since the crack of dawn and she'll be doing herself proud at the table. You'll not go away hungry." Her lilt was, if anything, more pronounced this morning and I attributed that to the natural relaxation of friendship. She knew that she needn't try to hide her accent from me, because I would not criticize her for it. It was another piece of unconscious flattery on her part, and it added to the morning's uplift.

"Is my father up as yet?" I asked.

For a brief instant her face registered surprise. "No, mum, I shouldn't think so; he never is." She studied me carefully, trying to decide whether to add anything more, then decided in my favor. "Himself's not to be seen until after the sun goes down; his eyes, you know, but you'll be seeing him tonight at dinner. It's blind he'll be during the day, but at night it's different."

Her words brought back the picture of my father walking down the darkened hallway without the need of

a light to guide him. My face portrayed the feelings that churned within me and Bridget noticed it immediately, although she was at a loss to account for it. I could see that she was worried.

"Is anything the matter, mum?" she asked. "You're not looking too well. Perhaps you'd like me to bring your breakfast to you in bed. You needn't fret about that; I've brought *her* breakfast to her many times." Her eyes searched my face for some clue to my sudden malaise; failing in that, she gazed around the room to unearth the reason. She saw the melted candle with its burnt wick on the bedside table and returned her questioning gaze to me.

"Was I forgetting to leave you a candle holder last night? Next, I'll be forgetting to tell you that there's a letter waiting for you downstairs." Her voice sounded her uncertainty.

How was I to answer her without dragging through a long explanation of the night's events? I wanted her help, but not at the cost of betraying my father to suspicions that had no definite basis in fact. It was a problem, but she solved it for me by returning to her chattering commentary on the morning's happenings.

"It gave herself a fright, it did," she said. "Cook was in her nightgown and all when the bell rang in the entrance hall. It was a sight, it was. She picked up a wicked-looking knife and marched to the door as calm as you please, like it was nothing at all to be receiving people at five in the morning. She opened the door and waved the blade once or twice to show that it was by her, then curtsied as fine as you please. I'll tell you, it's not often you'll see that one bow to anybody—'cept on Sunday, of course." With a perkiness that I now realized was natural,

she acted out the whole episode so comically that I found myself laughing heartily.

"Well? Don't stop now. Who was it?" I asked.

"That I'll not be knowing, being unable to see through herself, but I heard him say that he would be returning later in the day and to give you his letter when you awakened." She spoke in a whisper, which I imagined was because she didn't want the cook to hear her tale. Or was there another reason?

"Well now, I shan't be able to satisfy my curiosity until I've read the letter from my mysterious caller, so let's hurry downstairs." I took her hand, and we went down the stairs like two school friends, arm in arm.

The further we descended, the lighter it became. The reception hall was not at all as I had imagined it to be the night before. The darkness had concealed many treasures from my eyes that only now came to life. The walls were not blank, but were rather sheathed in tapestries portraying an interesting though military motif, which appeared quite suitable for this setting. I could only guess at their age, but there was no doubt that they were ancient and their lineage proud; they were indeed beautiful. The floors were panoramas of the past. There were designs set into their glistening marble that upon close inspection showed up as graphic mosaics of military feats and battles. Armored knights fought bristling Saracens in what I imagined must be a scene from one of the Crusades; each large square of flooring was a different vignette.

The entire hall was exceptional in its design and I felt as if I could spend a month of Sundays here studying and admiring the various beauties. But I could sense that Bridget was anxious to be on her way. She was, after all,

a maid in this household; our personal friendship did not alter her domestic position, as far as she was concerned. We passed through the hall and entered a corridor lined with statues and armor, each piece showing signs of constant care. It was a long corridor, but finally, at the end of it, I saw something that startled me.

There stood my stepmother. I didn't need the warning of Bridget's indrawn breath to tell me that the woman waiting for me was the *dark one*, because everything about her fit that description. She was dressed in a riding costume of black silk. A black leather riding crop was in her slender white hand, and a black lace mantilla crowned her jet black hair. She was strikingly beautiful. She was standing beneath the high arched ceiling with the sunlight streaming in about her, framing her in a corona of glowing gold. I stood still, almost in awe, then continued towards her. She was not at all what I expected.

"You are Elizabeth, no?" she asked in a throaty voice tinged with a Spanish accent.

"Yes, I am," I replied. "You must be my step—"

She interrupted before I could even finish framing the words in my mind. "It would be best if you called me Consuelo. It would be difficult for you to call me mother and I do not want to start our friendship with difficulties. No?"

She had gone right to the heart of the matter. It would be almost impossible for me to call her mother. She seemed to be only slightly older than myself and the situation was far too strange for me even to think of endearments. In one stroke she had eased me considerably. Her mention of friendship disarmed any thoughts I may have had about Bridget's foolish prattling. She was dressed in black, but her smile and self-assurance eliminated the concept of "dark one" from my mind.

"Is it so hard for you to say Consuelo?" she asked, her eyes dancing with laughter. "It's Spanish for consolation."

At first, I stood before her like some tongue-tied child, but then the amusement in her eyes eased my burden and I also laughed. "Consuelo? No, it's not difficult for me to say, although I never studied Spanish in school. But I'm afraid that you caught me off balance." I spoke quickly. "It's a beautiful name."

"*Bueno*. That means good. We will be friends and you will call me Consuelo as I call you Elizabeth. In Spanish, your name would be Isabella, but this this is not Spain." At the mention of Spain, her eyes darkened with what I took to be sadness. "There's breakfast waiting for you. I've already eaten and I'm late for my morning ride. I will see you after I return and we can speak. No?" Always the "no" at the end of a sentence, said with a rising tone.

She was on her way before I could give her an answer, but then her question had been rhetorical and didn't require one. I would see her later and we would talk. That had been her promise. I looked forward to the conversation with high hopes, for it would surely help me to understand the present situation better. It needed explanation, as last night's incident proved beyond doubt. I watched her leave and then turned to Bridget.

"She seems quite pleasant," I said. "Not quite the dark power I had expected. Really, Bridget, you'll have to curb your imagination somewhat." I said this laughing, but she took my remark as harsh criticism.

"Yes, mum," she said, "I'll do just that."

"Bridget, don't be foolish. I'm not criticizing you. I'm just saying that she seems quite nice to me and, after all, she is my stepmother. I want us all to be friends." It was as if I were talking to myself; I could feel that she was

not truly listening to me any more. A moment's meeting wasn't going to change her intense dislike of Consuelo. I had no idea as to the source of that hatred.

"I've me own thoughts." She practically glared. "Will you be wanting breakfast now?"

It was useless to argue, so I simply nodded and we set off for the dining room together, but no longer arm in arm. I wanted to reseal the bonds of our friendship, but did not know how at the moment. Perhaps I would be better prepared after talking to Consuelo. I hoped so. I couldn't afford to lose my first friend in this strange household.

A short walk brought us into an impressive dining room, the sight of which held me in thrall. I could well imagine a host of guests clustered around the incredibly long table, whose soft glowing top held the sunlight in its shine. Each guest would have more than ample room to sport his manners, for the table was at least forty feet long. At the end of this huge board, a service of cut crystal and heavy silverware lay among a feast of steaming serving plates and chafing dishes lit with miniature candles. There was enough food on the table to feed a small cohort and all of it looked delectable to my starving eyes.

"I'll go tell cook that you're ready to eat breakfast," she said. "No doubt she'll be out to hear your desires."

"Thank you, Bridget," I said. "By the way, you mentioned that there's a letter for me. Could you please bring it?"

"It should be on the table," she said, "right before you."

I seated myself and placed a linen napkin on my lap, but I couldn't see any letter. "I don't seem to be able to find it. Perhaps it's been placed somewhere else."

"No, mum, it should be right in front of you." I could see she was puzzled. "Cook would not be moving

it. It's not there though and that's a fact, but it was when I went to awaken you." Her features pulled into a tight mask. "Perhaps someone's picked it up." She meant my stepmother.

"Whatever for?" I questioned.

"That I'll not be knowing." Again her air of mystery.

It was certainly curious that the letter should disappear, but I didn't want to dwell on possible dark plots and changed the subject quickly. "The food smells delicious and I'm hungry enough to do it justice. Is there any coffee?"

"Cook'll be bringing that out herself," she said, "but I'll tell her that you're asking for it." Without further comment she went through the door to what I imagined must be the kitchen. The door closed quietly and I was alone with my meal.

What had happened to the letter? I was sure that Bridget had placed it on the table; she had no reason to lie. Yet it was no longer there. Someone had removed it for reasons that I could not even guess at and the thought was not a pleasant one. Bridget said that the letter was brought in the early hours of the morning and that the man would return later in the day. Who could it possibly be? I knew no one in this area and felt sure no one but my aunt's few friends knew of my whereabouts. It was another mystery. I was rapidly beginning to fear mysteries.

The door opened suddenly and I was presented with a sight both funny and serious. A large, raw-boned woman stood before me holding a silver pitcher, her expression one of irate surprise. She was very definitely the cook, her apron proved that, and her sharp eyes examined me intently. She seemed vaguely dissatisfied with what she beheld—me.

"Would there be something wrong with the food?" she asked caustically.

"No, certainly not," I replied. "It all looks so good that I haven't been able to choose as yet. It smells wonderful."

My answer to her testy remark seemed to mollify her. Her frown turned to a smile. "You'll be Miss Elizabeth. I be thinking, and unless I'm much mistaken, it's been a while since you've had a decent meal. You'll not be filling your stomach by waiting for the right decision, so why don't you sample a bit of everything and save the worry?" It was easy to see why Bridget thought of cook as *herself*. The woman was a combination of major-domo and wise coddling sage.

"Thank you, cook," I said. "That sounds like a very sensible idea." I opened one of the serving dishes and the aroma of succulent sausage, browned in butter, made my mouth water. Eggs and crisp golden toast followed the sausage on my plate and I began to eat with delight; the food was absolutely delicious. As soon as I started to devour the steaming delicacies, cook poured the coffee and another savory aroma spurred my appetite.

My hunger satisfied, I waited for cook to return so that I could question her about the mysterious visitor who had asked to see me. Also I hoped to find out who had sent me the letter. She returned in a few minutes with another pot of coffee and as she was pouring it, I said, "Cook, Bridget told me that there was someone here to see me this morning. Could you tell me anything about him? Has he been here before?" My questions had an unusual effect on the woman. She stared at me for a moment then turned on her heel and walked away, but not without a parting comment. "I've never seen him before and as he seems prone to be coming in the middle of the

night, I'll not be hoping he returns." With that, she left the dining room.

What on earth was going on here? Everybody seemed about ready to bite my head off at the slightest provocation or none at all. The household was divided, which made me wonder whether I would be able to make friends with one faction without antagonizing the other. It was not a pleasant way to begin my life at the manor, but I knew that it wouldn't be easy when I'd decided to come here. Darkness and distrust seemed to the the way of life here, but not for me.

I sensed, rather than heard, someone come up behind me. For a second I tensed my body in anticipation. I was almost afraid to turn my head, but then I realized how foolish I was. I turned; it was Consuelo.

"Did you enjoy your breakfast?" she asked.

"Yes, I did, thank you," I replied, "but I seem to be missing a letter which was left here for me and I'm curious as to what happened to it." Her eyes clouded.

"Your letter? Of course, I have it here with me. I'm sorry, but I thought it was for me and I opened it by mistake. You will forgive, no?" She spoke in a long breathless chain, but somehow her tone rang false to my ears. She handed me the letter with its seal shattered.

The letter was plainly addressed to *Miss Elizabeth Halsley*, but I could see no advantage in bringing such an obvious point to her attention. Whatever her reasons for opening my letter, she clearly didn't want to discuss them and so I also avoided the subject. "Mistakes happen, so of course I don't blame you," I said.

I took the letter from the slashed envelope and began to read it carefully. Before I could read more than the salutation, which was formal, she interrupted my thoughts.

"I think we two have a lot to talk about, but I do not

want to rush you. If it meets with your approval, perhaps I can come to your room a little later." Her voice was again friendly. I warmed to it immediately.

"I should like that very much," I said.

"*Bueno*. Then I will see you in about an hour," she said.

"Fine, I shall expect you then." I did want to speak to her. My sincerity produced in her a flashing smile.

She rose from the table and gave me a gracious salute with her delicate hand as she left. Her poise and grace were absolutely astonishing to me. She moved with an effortless sweep across the floor. I would not have been at all surprised to learn that she had once been a ballet dancer, because she had that motion that made such dancers truly famous. Even after she had gone her perfume lingered in the air. My father had chosen a beautiful woman for his wife. Still, underneath that charming exterior, I could sense a core of hard, cold ambition. I had no definite reason to feel that way. I put it down to Bridget's supernatural warnings.

I was finished with breakfast, but was too lethargic to move rapidly, so sat at the table and thought about what I would do on my first day at the manor. Suddenly it dawned on me that the missing letter was now in front of me and I picked it up again. The letter was from Dr. William Talbot. Of course! He was Maggie's son. From the title, I realized that he must have finished his residency and was now in practice; that was a pleasant surprise. I wondered for a moment how he knew that I was living here, but then, all I need do was read and I would have my explanation spelled out before me.

"*My Dear Miss Halsley,*

We have never met, but I owe your family a debt of

long standing. I have recently received a communication from Dr. Andrews who asked me to look in on you and convey his best wishes. I shall deliver this letter in the early morning and shall pay my respects later in the day.

It is my sincerest hope that you are happy at the manor and I speak for my family as well.

Your obedient servant,
William Talbot, M.D.

The letter was stiff and formal. No doubt Dr. Talbot was merely obeying a summons from Dr. Andrews and had little reason to be otherwise. We had never met, but somehow I had expected a different sort of letter from him and I felt slightly disappointed. He said that he would call later in the day and that would give me a chance to see what he was really like. His mother, Maggie, was always slightly formal and perhaps that accounted for his ways. I hoped so.

In any case there was a lot to be done before he arrived.

I returned to my room to change and to arrange the clothing in my closet in the manner I preferred; this was my new home and I wanted to settle in. The door to my room was wide open and Consuelo was seated before my dresser mirror combing her long black hair. She made an astonishingly beautiful sight and I paused in wonder to watch her feminine motions. I could see her watching me in the mirror and so I saw little need in knocking at my own door.

"Hello, Elizabeth," she said. "You will forgive me for entering your room when you weren't present, but I wanted to wait for you. We will have our little talk now, *hein?*"

"Certainly. I've wanted to speak to you since I first

came here and I missed you last night." I tried to avoid the sound of criticism in my voice, but it was difficult.

"Last night, yes." She paused to consider her answer to my challenge. "Your father preferred that I not be present for purposes of his own and I thought him correct. You had so much to say to each other and my presence might have made matters far more constrained. I wanted to meet with you, but after all he is your father and I submitted to his decision.

"You've noticed the constant darkness in this part of the manor, no? It does help your father, of course, but it is not right that a young pretty girl should have to be locked away in an unfriendly castle. So I have asked the major to allow a small party in your honor. Would you like that?"

Her question caught me by surprise. "A party in my honor? I don't understand."

"I think you would call it a housewarming, or is it a coming-out party? I am not quite proficient in English as yet, but I think that a party would be wonderful for you. Come now, you would enjoy such a festivity, would you not?"

A party would be nice and might go far towards eliminating my first unpleasant impressions of Haelstrom Manor. The more I thought about it the better the idea seemed. She was waiting for my answer. I gave it. "I think that a party would be splendid. I thank you for suggesting it. But whom will we invite?"

"We can start with your young man, or am I being premature?" Her question was far more intense than the situation demanded and I could sense a coldness behind her warm exterior.

"I've never met Dr. Talbot before," I commented

drily. "Our families have been close for many years and he was simply making a courtesy call on me at the bequest of an old friend. I'm afraid that I do not know anyone in this region. The guest list will have to be left to you." I made my point clearly and I could see that she accepted it.

"Surely you must have some school friends that you could invite. The party that I was thinking of would not take place for another two weeks and that should allow you sufficient time to invite those you wish. I will also consult with your father. I'm certain that he will have many friends whose children would be quite pleased to accept. Is that all right with you? After all, it's to be your very own party." She was so self-assured that I could not even begin to question her correctness.

"I believe several of my school friends do live in the state, but do you think that they would be able to come here? We are quite far from the city." I tried in this manner to see just what she had planned, but then I saw how petty I was being and modified my speech. "Would it be all right if some of my friends stayed over at the manor for a few days so that they could rest after the paarty and so that I could have time to be with them?"

"Certainly. That was exactly what I had in mind." She spoke softly and convincingly. "If you will write out their names and addresses, I will have invitations sent out. They shall be invited to stay here as long as you wish. After all, this is your home also. We will have a beautiful party. Perhaps it will help bring your father back into social life. It has been long since anyone paid us a visit and I don't know when the last party at Haelstrom took place. A lot of planning must be done. Have you the proper clothing?"

"I suppose so," I answered, "but perhaps you can tell me if I have. I haven't had much experience with parties."

She gave me a warm smile and went to my closet. She inspected my new frocks and cloaks, then turned to me with a look of long-suffering compassion on her animated features. "My dear child," she said, "you have absolutely nothing to wear—not only for the party, but for normal use. We'll have to correct this immediately."

How could she say that? I knew that I wasn't a fashion plate, but certainly my clothing was of good quality and style. I stood flabbergasted, unable to make any retort to what I considered an attack.

"Elizabeth, I'm not saying this to hurt you, heavens no. But you are Major Halsley's child and that means that you must dress the part. Can't you understand that?" Her question went right to the mark.

"What do you mean? I've always thought my apparel was quite proper. Maybe I've been mistaken." I no longer felt that she was attacking my taste and I turned to her for advice.

She took out several of my best dresses and held them up to the light for inspection. She seemed obviously dissatisfied with the result. "Yes, the clothing is proper, but proper for your former circumstances. They are all colorless and without form." Her gaze shifted from the dress. I could feel her eyes searching my body. "You have a perfectly beautiful figure, but you put it to no use. You hide it under these ill-fitting gowns. You are no longer a simple schoolgirl. You should now dress your station. In this whole closet, I can find only one cloak that is attractive, the blue velvet one. I can see that we shall have our work cut out trying to get you ready for the party. But don't worry. I know a dressmaker who will start you on

the way. Then, we shall definitely have to go to Albany this week to outfit you in current style. Would you like that?"

"Albany?" I said reverently. "I've never been to Albany. I should enjoy seeing what it's like. Will you go with me?"

"Certainly," she answered. "It wouldn't do to leave you by yourself in a big city. Besides, I may want to pick up a few things for myself. You should find Albany very exciting. We will arrange so that you can see as much of it as possible. I will tell your father and we should be ready to leave in about two or three days. Is that all agreed?"

"Yes," I said enthusiastically. "It should be wonderful."

"I hope it will be. Right now we both have a great deal to get ready and not much time. I will have to arrange for music and flowers and the million other things that must be taken care of and you will have to furnish me with your list of names. I will speak to your father later tonight when he is up and about. I'm sure he will agree with our decisions." She paused and looked at me sedately. "Now, let us have our little talk, no?"

I could see that her party mood was over and that she was now concentrating on more serious matters. I frankly didn't know where to begin. "What shall we talk about?" I asked, trying to regain my balance.

"It is difficult," she sighed. "I want us to know each other well. I will start by telling you something of my life before I met and married your father." She stopped for effect. "I was born in Spain and spent my early childhood there before going to Cuba to live. Our customs are much different from your own, but that's unimportant. I was raised very strictly, but with much love and attention. My father, Don Alverez, was made comman-

dant of the fort in San Diego, where we lived in a house much like this one. The war changed many things for us, but that is another story entirely." As she spoke about the war her eyes smoldered with a hatred that I thought must erupt any moment. How she must have detested the men who came and destroyed her way of life! But my father was one of those men and surely she didn't hate him . . . did she? Of course not. She would never have married him.

I had listened to her carefully and now I interrupted. "Don Alverez?" I asked. "Wasn't he my father's jailer?" My question had an immediate and explosive result.

"Where did you hear that lie?" she demanded.

"Mr. Torder," I replied naturally.

"That one. Yes, he would say something like that. It is a false and malicious lie; my father was the commandant of the fort. It was not his fault that some prisoners were held there until the authorities could take them away. My father was an honorable man, not some stinking jailer as Torder would have you believe. My father would not stoop to such a profession." She was terribly angry. I believe that had she had Torder here, she would have attacked him physically. For the first time I fully recognized the burning anger of absolute hatred and the sight frightened me.

"Please do not be angry with me. I never meant to suggest that your father was anything but an honorable man; it's just that I remembered Torder mentioning the name." I was trying desperately to soothe her distress.

"You are quite right. We shall forget this for now. I shall have something to say to Torder when I see him next. It is not your fault that you believed that liar, but I am now too upset to continue with our little talk. You will forgive me." She was halfway to the door before I

even realized that she intended to leave. She flung the door open, revealing Bridget standing in the hallway. Consuelo passed by without a sign that she had noticed her. Bridget slipped in before the door slammed shut.

"Glory be, she's in a bit of a hurry, that one, and not too happy, I'd wager. Did you have a fight?" Bridget's voice betrayed the fact that she was pleased to see Consuelo disturbed.

"I'm not yet certain myself, Bridget," I said, "but you certainly didn't come up here about that. Is anything the matter?"

"Not so's I know of, mum. I just came up here to tell you there's a visitor waiting for you downstairs. It's the same one's been here this morning; cook told me so." She said this quickly, liltingly.

"Thank you, Bridget," I said. "I'll be right down."

Bridget looked at me for another moment and then left the room. I was still quite shaky from the scene with my stepmother. I tried to get my runaway emotions under control. It wouldn't do for Dr. Talbot to find me upset, for I knew he would report back to Dr. Andrews and his parents as well; I didn't want to worry them.

I primped for an instant in front of the mirror and then hurried down the stairs. Dr. Talbot was waiting for me at the base of the staircase, but his attention was directed elsewhere. He was staring at the floor's inlay. He was very tall and, from what I could see, handsome as well.

"Dr. Talbot," I said, startling him somewhat. "I'm Elizabeth Halsley."

He turned on his heel to face me quickly and I looked into the bluest pair of eyes that I had ever beheld. He was smiling now. I felt myself coddled and warmed by that smile; it stretched over his entire face. He was dressed very conservatively in a dark brown suit, but his cravat

was wild and rebellious in the extreme. His voice matched his appearance—soft, but vibrant.

"You're not at all what I expected to find," he said. "You're beautiful." His words slipped from his tongue before he could temper them and when he realized what he had just said, he blushed. "I mean that you are beautiful, far more so than I thought any woman could possibly be." His gallantry was doubly refreshing because it was seldom used and therefore sincere.

"Why, thank you, sir. I shall treasure that compliment." I spoke lightly so as not to embarrass further this serious young man. "I must admit that I didn't expect to hear from you this way; I mean that I understood you to be in Boston, not here in Ardsmore. Is there anything in particular that brings you to this part of the state, or are you on vacation?"

His deep blue eyes shaded suddenly. "You might say a bit of both. I received a letter from Dr. Andrews. He asked me to look in on you. He is worried, you know, and I did want to see you and thank you for your kindness to my parents."

"I can't take credit for the kindness. It was my aunt's doing. But thank you anyway," I said honestly. "Would you like to follow me to the reception room? We can be far more comfortable there and perhaps you'd like some coffee or tea."

"Thank you, that would be very nice, but I don't want to put you out in any way." Always polite, if not formal.

"It won't be any bother, I assure you." I said this wondering if indeed it would occasion any trouble with cook, but I'd have to find out in any case.

We entered tht reception room and I stepped over to the bell cord to ring for Bridget or cook. I pulled at it twice, then seated myself opposite Dr. Talbot and tried

to make myself as comfortable as possible. It wasn't easy because I wasn't quite sure of the reception I should receive from the person who answered my ring and I dearly hoped that there wouldn't be any scene. I was too new here to know what was considered proper or not.

"You seem quite settled in here," he said. "I had a chance to look over the manor while I was waiting for you and I must say that its' somewhat deceptive. I used to be an interested amateur in old fortifications, but I don't remember ever seeing one like this before. Externally, the manor is quite different from its interior and I've been trying to determine the reason." He paused for a moment, then continued. "I don't mean to bore you."

I sensed that his conversation about the manor was primarily intended to cover his discomfort at having to hold a formal tête-à-tête with a person he had just this moment met; he was not yet experienced in such light talk. I wanted to reassure him. "You're not boring me at all. I've noticed the same thing myself." I told him what Bridget told me as well as what I had myself discovered, but did not mention my thoughts concerning a secret panel in my bedroom nor the attack on my life; those were reserved for my own consideration. He actually seemed interested in the manor's architecture and I wondered if I hadn't made a mistake in thinking him uncomfortable in my presence.

He was extremely handsome in a blonde rugged way. I could well imagine the nurses at his hospital swooning to meet him and hoping to coax him into marriage. He was slightly above average height, but gave the appearance of being much taller because he sat erect. My school friends would have intrigued for hours to meet him, and I among them.

"Are you happy here?" he asked.

His question caught me unprepared, but I recovered. "I don't really know," I answered. "I will be, I suppose, but it's all too new and confusing for me right now. There's so much to catch up with and I've only just begun."

"I know that question sounded foolish, but the good doctor asked me to inquire. He's rather worried, I think, although I don't know why. As a matter of fact," he said quietly, "he demanded that I ask. Perhaps you know the reason." His voice indicated a question, but I passed over it and switched the tack.

"Are you headed back to Vermont now that you've finished your studies in Boston?"

"Not quite yet," he replied. "I've been staying with a friend in Albany. I'm taking a bit of a vacation from the routines of hospital life. I expect to stay another month or so and then decide. Of course, my parents would like me to practice near home, but I honestly haven't made up my mind as yet." His smile was warming.

I knew that I was behaving like a giddy schoolgirl, but I was beginning to fall in love with him and tried to curb my racing impulses so that I wouldn't make a complete fool of myself. I had just met him, yet I hung on his every word as if that would resolve the growing swirl within my heart. It was ridiculous, but I could not deny its truth. I was in love, unsure only whether I was in love with him or in love with love itself. It had happened too suddenly for me to trust. However, at this point, I wanted him to remain near me and I conceived of a plan. If only he would agree!

"Dr. Talbot, I wond—"

"Could you possibly change that to William, or, better yet, to Bill?" His tone was mildly bantering.

It probably meant little to him, but his request for informality made me positively glow. "Certainly, if it will please you. Bill, I was wondering whether you could possibly see your way clear to attending a party that is going to be given in my honor. Do you think you might?"

He smiled at me quickly. "I should be happy to, but you haven't mentioned the date of the party and I'm afraid that it's rather important as I shall have to make plans."

I blushed. "My fault," I said. "I'm not sure of the exact date yet, but it should be within two weeks at most."

I watched his reaction carefully. He seemed to think about the party for an instant and then his face clouded with indecision. What was worrying him? Of course: the expense of having to stay in town during this period; he obviously couldn't commute from Albany for a party. I should have realized his financial embarrassment.

"That might be rather difficult. I haven't a great deal of money and the trip back and forth from Albany would be a burden to me right now." He stopped speaking for a moment and blushed. "I'm truly sorry to have to turn down your gracious invitation, but I must."

"It's my fault entirely," I said. "I should have known, but as you've been honest, I'd like to be as well. I truly want you to attend the affair, because few people there will be from home. Consuelo said the guests could stay at the manor before the party, so I don't see why you shouldn't remain here until then. Is that all right with you? I hope it is."

"Consuelo?" he asked.

"She's my stepmother," I said.

"That's certainly a generous offer," he said gallantly,

"too generous to refuse. Miss Halsley, I'd be honored to accept your invitation." His innate chivalry showed in the manner of his acceptance and comforted me.

"I'm happy that you can," I said sincerely. "I'll speak to my stepmother later this morning. I'm certain that she'll make all the necessary arrangements."

We continued speaking in this vein for a few minutes until we were interrupted by Pedro's entrance. He seemed to slither into the room without making the slightest sound and only his father forced cough betrayed his presence.

"You rang?" His tone accused more than questioned.

"Yes, I did," I replied rather haughtily. "Would you please bring us some coffee and cakes? We'll be waiting here."

I could see that he wanted to say something more, but he finally managed to control his overt dislike for me and once again slithered off. The odor of his hatred permeated the room and brought back the terror of the previous night; there seemed to be the same quality between the two.

Bill watched Pedro depart and I could see a puzzled frown on his face. "Strange sort, that one," he said. "Hardly the type I'd expect to be in service. Can't say I'd care to have him around me." He had spoken half to himself, but I found myself agreeing with him. But for some reason my father wanted Pedro here.

"I only hope that he understood me," I said. "Bridget, she's a maid, tells me that very few of the servants understand English, but I suppose he got my message. I'm afraid I'm not too well aware of the social order around here as yet."

"I shouldn't worry about that if I were you," he said brightly. "I'm certain that you'll do just fine."

"Thank you for your confidence. I dare say that I need all the best wishes I can gather. This is all very strange to me. I'm still caught up with the tragedy of my aunt's passing away so suddenly. I don't seem to be able really to accept all that's happened. Oh, I don't mean to bore you with my silly prattle." I could see that he had been intent on every word that I had spoken and somehow this made me quite happy. I very much wanted him to be interested in me.

"Would you think me so terribly foolish if I told you that there's some intangible feeling of . . ." He paused as if to collect his thoughts, then continued. "Of evil. Yes, that's the word—evil, but I can't quite put my finger on it; I just feel it. Now that I've said it, I realize how idiotic it must sound." His tone was completely sincere and I could see that he was embarrassed to have become so emotional. Unlike myself, he was not involved in this household, which made his statement all the more important.

"It doesn't seem idiotic at all," I replied. "I've had the identical feeling ever since I arrived here, but I thought it was all in my imagination; that is, until you echoed my very thoughts. You're right, there is a feeling of evil here. I don't understand it, but that makes it all the more frightening." As I spoke, I again felt the sensation of someone watching me, carefully and intently. For a moment, I was tempted to turn around and search for my tormentor, but the doctor's presence kept me from giving in to my desires. This house was evil, that much was certain, but why was it so and who was responsible? My disturbed emotions must have been visible to Dr. Talbot's discerning eyes, because he suddenly moved close to me and took my hand.

"There now, I've just met you and I've managed to

frighten you beyond reason. I'm sorry. I don't want you to think that I make a habit of doing such things." He sounded concerned. He wanted me to relax and be comforted, I could tell, but I could also sense that he was interested in me personally, which made my heart want to sing. Could he be interested in me in more than a friendly fashion? Oh, I hoped so.

"Thanks for your concern, Dr. Talbot, but it wasn't your fault at all. I guess the circumstances of the past few weeks have been more than I could handle. I do thank you for your interest, though." I said this breathlessly for I could feel the warm touch of his hand on mine and that touch was rapidly setting my heart on fire.

At that moment Consuelo entered the room and for an instant I thought that she would actually strike us both. There was anger in every movement that she made towards us, but her sense of tact hid this from Bill. She strode across the room rapidly and stood before us, a challenge in her stance.

"You didn't tell me that you were . . . engaged." Her statement had the effect of making Bill withdraw his hand from mine as if guilty and this made her smile satanically. Her lips were drawn into a sneer and her eyes smoldered with disgust. Why did she react this way to an innocent meeting? For what purpose?

Chapter Eight

HER TONE and manner had taken me completely by surprise. I found myself at a loss to say anything that would lighten the mood she had set. I looked at Bill helplessly and he responded to my soundless plea.

"I didn't have the pleasure of meeting you before, but let me take this opportunity to introduce myself. I'm Dr. William Talbot. I presume you're Miss Halsley's stepmother." His forthright manner seemed to put a damper on her temper.

"How do you do, Dr. Talbot? I'm sorry if I startled you, but I was just coming down to ask Elizabeth if she had made up her guest list as yet for a party that's to be given in her honor. However, I'm sure that can wait until later." She was smiling now. I was amazed at her rapid change from avenger to social debutante, but Bill took it as a matter of course. Perhaps I had been mistaken in taking her words to be derisive, but I didn't think so. For some reason of her own, she was angry at me for having Bill with me. She was an enigma, to be sure, but I was too happy to be overly discouraged. Nothing would ruin this morning for me—nothing.

"Won't you join us?" said Bill. "Miss Halsley had just invited me to her party and we were discussing the details. I'm afraid I'll have to beg your indulgence and your roof as I shall be unable to commute from Albany."

I could see that Consuelo did not fully comprehend what Bill was talking about and decided to take the bull by the horns and explain. It would sound better coming from me. I should have been the one to broach the subject in the first place if only I hadn't been so disconcerted by her imperious manner.

"Consuelo, I've invited Dr. Talbot to stay at the manor until the party. I hope that's all right with you." I spoke quickly as if afraid that she would disagree at the last moment. I needn't have worried.

"I think that's a perfectly wonderful idea," she said. "That will give you some company while you're waiting for the fiesta." There was a sparkle in her voice that I couldn't account for, but I was relieved that the episode had passed so effortlessly. I hoped it would continue so.

The three of us talked for a little while about the weather and other inconsequentials until Pedro returned with a tray loaded with numerous edibles, but not the coffee I had requested. Nor were there any cakes. As he entered the room his sly smirk changed to one of confusion. He had noticed Consuelo seated with us and he must have realized that he would have some explaíning to do when I told her that he had not brought what I had specifically ordered. He was right; I was furious.

"Pedro, I asked for coffee and cakes, not this assortment." I purposely made my voice sound aggrieved because I wanted to see Consuelo's reaction.

"What is the trouble?" asked Consuelo.

"I distinctly asked him to bring us coffee and cake, not this jumble of leftovers. I think that he did this purposely." My statement made little sense when made aloud, but I could see that she understood my agitation.

Consuelo turned to Pedro and began to question him in a rapid and rough-sounding Spanish, which made him

cringe. I was unable to follow the conversation, but I could see that Pedro was patently upset by her inquisition and was seeking any excuse for leaving. Finally, she allowed him to leave, then turned to us.

"He claims that it was a mistake," she said, "but I am not entirely convinced that he was telling the truth. He acted unforgivably. I have just told him that the next such incident will cost him his position. That should insure his good behavior from now on. I'm sorry that this happened to you, but it will pass." She gave us both a flashing smile and then rose to her feet. "I must be leaving you both for now, but I shall look forward to seeing you quite soon, Dr. Talbot." She held out her hand to Bill and grasped his firmly for an instant, then left the room.

As I turned to face Bill, I noticed he had a strange expression on his otherwise smiling features and I wondered why. I wanted to ask, but her entrance and exit had succeeded in putting a barrier between us. We were no longer as free and relaxed as before. Consuelo's personality had left its mark. I could see Dr. Talbot retreat into his past formality.

We talked a few more minutes and then he said that he had to make certain arrangements in town so that he could return to the manor without any niggling details to worry him. I escorted him to the door and watched while he got into a waiting carriage. The carriage started off down the pathway and I closed the door, since his parting depressed me somewhat. I had just met him, but I knew that he had become extremely important to me and I looked forward to seeing him again with more than just friendly interest.

It had certainly been a memorable if confusing morning, and the afternoon promised to be much the same. I would have to return to my room to prepare a list of

names, the sooner the better. With this in mind, I hurried up the staircase and down the corridor to my room. I still held the memory of Consuelo's anger at finding me with Dr. Talbot, however. She had been furious, which made me wonder whether she might not be jealous. Of course, that was ridiculous; or was it? How could she possibly be jealous of me? Why?

In my absence, my room had been cleaned and the bed covers straightened, which I assumed to be the work of Bridget. No doubt she had mumbled about my friendship with Consuelo, and the thought of that conversation with the wind made me laugh to myself. Perhaps, she was right after all, but I didn't want to believe that now because so much was dependent on my remaining comfortable here. She had to be wrong—had to be!

I saw that the candle wax had been scraped from the table and that there was now a shiny new candle holder in its place, which brought back some of the night's terror. I wondered whether the broken or dented holder would still be wedged on the fearsome rocks below. But for some stroke of fortune, the design of which I was not yet certain, I would now lie broken on the rocky teeth below. Yet I now found myself wondering whether the vicious attack had been meant to destroy me, because if it had, then I should certainly be dead. That the assassination had simple miscarried was perhaps too strange to believe.

I moved to the leather-topped desk, which now contained all my papers and writing materials. I sat down and began to list all the possible names that I could think of, but very few of my friends lived within visiting distance of the manor. It was rather discouraging, but then, the party was certainly unexpected and therefore welcome.

A party in my honor! It would be wonderful, I knew; now that I had met Dr. Talbot, it would be heavenly.

I had just finished listing the few friends I thought could possibly attend the fiesta when I heard someone knocking at my door. I called for the person to enter and rose from my chair to greet my caller. It was Bridget and I could see from her smiling face that she had forgiven me my indiscretions and that she had some news for me. She must have run up the stairs as she was out of breath.

"Miss Halsley, Miss Halsley, a package has just arrived for you and just wait until you see it." She paused to catch her breath. "They're beautiful, they are."

"What's beautiful, Bridget? Don't keep me in suspense." Her high spirits were contagious. I found myself laughing in perfect harmony with her. It seemed to me that our friendship was now fully restored.

"I'll not be letting my tongue ruin the surprise of it," she said merrily. "It's waiting for you downstairs, mum."

"Have it your own way, Bridget. I'll be down in a minute; I've only to put the finishing touches to this list and I'll join you. Why don't you have a seat?" I was, of course, extremely curious about the package, but I wanted to finish my task so that it would be off my mind once and for all. I added the last two names, then folded the list in half and put it in an envelope. I turned around to speak to Bridget and found her staring at the velvet cloak with a look of rapt attention on her broad face. No doubt, she was imagining herself wearing it, and was pleased beyond her wildest belief.

"It's so beautiful," she said almost to herself.

"It's yours any time you care to wear it, Bridget. I really do mean that." My words reached her through her

daydreams and I could see made her ecstatically happy.

"I thank you, Miss Elizabeth; it's kind you are." Her eyes were sparkling as she spoke.

"Now, what about that package?" I asked.

"Ach, I'd be forgetting all about it, what with your generous offer and all. I've put it in the main hall so that it'll be waiting for you, but if you like, I'll bring it up to you." I could tell from her tone that she wanted me to follow her downstairs. No doubt, she thought it part of the surprise to pique my interest and I couldn't disappoint her.

"Let's go then," I said perkily, "I'm consumed by curiosity and I'll not be able to satisfy it by standing around in this room." She was now waiting by the door and as I approached, she turned and opened it and then motioned me to follow her in the same way that children will often play hide-and-seek. I found myself caught up in her enthusiasm and followed her almost on tiptoe down the long branching corridor to the staircase.

We practically scampered down the winding stairs and, for the first time since I had arrived at the manor, I felt myself free from the watching eyes that had so unnerved me, those hidden eyes that poured out hatred. Bridget's pace was breakneck and I found myself hard pressed to keep up with her. Finally, we reached the bottom of the flight and entered the main hall, where the much-touted surprise awaited me.

Bridget turned and faced me with her back to the table, concealing the package behind her, and played the part of friendly tormentor to the hilt. "Now what would you be thinking is in the package behind me?"

"Oh don't torment me, Bridget. I'm dying with curiosity as it is. Be a dear and let me see the package. Please?"

My jokingly pleading tone heightened her enjoyment of the game and she laughed happily.

She moved aside and displayed a large wicker basket tied with a wide satin ribbon. The cover was on but Bridget knew the contents, so I realized that she must have opened the basket and then retied it. Once I opened the package, I found that she had understated the facts. The wicker basket was filled with the most beautiful roses that I had ever seen. They were, to my eyes, magnificent.

"Oh mum, aren't they the most gorgeous flowers you've ever seen?" Her question was spoken breathlessly.

I was too entranced to answer. There seemed to be at least two dozen of the long-stemmed roses, wrapped about with delicate ferns, and each rose was perfection in itself. I searched the package for some sign of the sender, but the package was empty of any card or message. Was it possible that Dr. Talbot could have sent them after leaving the manor? No, that couldn't be the case; he didn't have time. Perhaps Bridget knew the answer. "Bridget, there doesn't seem to be any card with the flowers. Do you have any idea who could have been so very kind?"

Bridget's shining face broke into a rippling pattern of smiles as she tried to contain herself. "Aye mum, I think I do, but it's not for certain I am. However, if you're asking me for a guess, then I'd have to say it was Mr. Torder himself that sent them."

Torder? The possibility had never entered my mind and I still found it rather difficult to accept, though there didn't seem to be any other person whom I could single out. Nevertheless, I doubted it. "Are you just making a wild guess, or have you information that I don't?"

"Unless I'm very much mistaken, these roses come

from his own garden. In fact, I'm fairly sure of it." Her reply seemed to be consistent with her own convictions, but it was still somewhat surprising.

"His own garden?" I asked. "I didn't know that Torder had his own garden."

"It's the only one that you're likely to find in this god-forsaken place. Mr. Torder has a way with things like that and he's planted a beautiful garden all by himself. The roses are his favorite and mine." Her stress on the "Mr." seemed perfectly understandable under the circumstances, and made me realize fully that there was a great deal about the man that I just hadn't suspected. There was no doubt that he had a gentle side to his nature, but why should he send me such a bouquet and why should he omit a card? It was truly strange. But the beauty of the gift warmed my heart and made my spirits soar.

"I wonder why he didn't bring them himself?" I asked half to myself.

"It wouldn't be his way. He's a gentle man beneath his gruff ways, but then I've better reason for knowing that, as I've personally witnessed his kindness before. You may take it for what you will, but he has a heart of burnished gold and he's free with it excepting where she interferes. There, I've said it; I've said it all." She stuck her jaw out and I could plainly see that there was no doubting her hero, not in her hearing anyhow. She hadn't missed the opportunity to decry the faults of my stepmother and she was firm in her convictions.

"Well, I'll take your word for it and thank him properly for his generosity when I see him next. It was very kind of him." I could see that my words had soothed her ruffled feathers and our friendship was once again

strengthened. "Now what do you suppose we should do with them? Is there a vase that we can put them in?"

"There is right enough," she replied quickly, "but if you'll be taking my advice, you'll put them in your own room."

I thought about her reply for a moment and then remembered the scene Consuelo had made when I mentioned Mr. Torder's conversation with me. It would be the best part of common sense to avoid any further demonstrations and so I agreed with Bridget's suggestion. The two of us hunted around for a vase of suitable size and, finding it, brought the roses back up and placed them on my dresser. They brought a delicate touch of summer to the otherwise cold room and made me very happy. "They certainly do wonders for this room," I said. "Each time I look at them, I'll be reminded of his kindness."

"They do that. It's a beautiful day outside and now it's been brought inside as well. Well, if you've no further need of me, I'll be getting back to my duties." She appeared almost unwilling to leave and I could understand it because she must have felt terribly lonely here without friends or even English speech. I felt much the same way myself.

"Bridget, could you do me a favor? I don't know if it's right of me to ask this, but could you possibly show me around the outside of the manor? I would dearly love to see Mr. Torder's garden as well as the rest of the grounds. Would it be all right with you?" My voice sounded the need that I felt for friendship and I could see that she welcomed it.

"Well, seeing as how herself told me to see to all your wants, I'll be doing my duty, and happy of it." She echoed my needs. "I'd best be telling her, though, and it

might be a mite chilly outside, so I'll be getting my cloak and join you here in a few moments." She gave me a full-blown smile and ran out of the room.

The sun was shining brightly, but I could see that it might indeed be quite chilly if we went near the cliff and so I took out the blue velvet cloak and wrapped it around me. The touch of the soft velvet made me feel incredibly rich and I gloried in its feel. I'd never worn so fine a cloak before and I could well understand Bridget's joy at being offered it for her own; it was, in fact, the only thing in my wardrobe that Consuelo considered decent enough to wear. In view of Consuelo's interest in my keeping my proper station, I decided that it would be best for all if I didn't tell her about my offer to lend Bridget my cloak. It was already clear to me that there was little love lost between the two, and I didn't want to further that enmity. It would be a secret between Bridget and myself. I was so involved in my own thoughts that I didn't hear the door open behind me and was surprised to hear Consuelo's voice.

"You are going some place?"

"Yes, I thought I would explore the grounds. There's so much I don't know about Haelstrom Manor. This is my home, after all." For some reason, I found myself speaking in a defensive tone.

"Of course, you are perfectly right. I think it's an excellent idea. But I must warn you that it is somewhat dangerous to walk near the cliff. You must be careful. If you wish a guide, I will ask Pedro to escort you." She noticed my immediate reaction of dislike at the mention of Pedro, and attempted to comfort me. "He's promised to be better behaved from now on, but if the thought disquiets you, then perhaps you have already chosen another companion."

Her accurate insight surprised me at first, and then I realized that she was reading my facial expressions perfectly. I would have to be careful if I wanted to keep anything from her. "I've asked Bridget. Is that all right?"

She was deathly silent for a minute, as if she were considering my statement with distaste, but then she made her decision and spoke. "Certainly, it's quite all right with me. However, it is not wise to be too familiar with a person below your station. I say this for your own good; believe me."

Her tone didn't call for a direct answer and so I made none. Nevertheless, I couldn't just leave it at that. "I imagine we've been brought up in different manners. My aunt always taught me that a person must be judged as an individual, not as a member of a caste. You might think that plebeian, but that's the way I've always felt." I was no longer on the defensive.

"You misunderstand me, Elizabeth. I do not mean that you should not choose your friends as you wish, but you must keep in mind that your father is a man of some social standing and others would not understand your notions; that's all I meant by my advice. I would not wish us to quarrel about so small a matter. Let us not speak of this any further, no?" Her voice rose on the last word and added a note of charm to her otherwise imperious words, but we were definitely worlds apart in many ways.

"As you wish," I answered. "Before I forget all about it, here's the list of names and addresses that you asked for." I handed her the envelope and waited patiently while she opened it and read the names aloud. I was waiting for her comment, and I wasn't disappointed.

"It is a small list, but I see that many of these girls come from *good* families; that is fine. I will have the invitations sent out immediately so that they will have plenty

of time to answer." She was evidently pleased by the thought of having what she termed *good families*, attend the celebration. "Well, I must go and see to the invitations now, so I'll bid you adios until later. Have a nice tour."

She left as suddenly as she had entered, but not before she noticed the flowers. I couldn't miss the expression of pure hatred on her face and it sent a shiver down my spine. She was fantastically changeable; one moment friendly and warm, the next cold and filled with fury. She was a complete puzzle to me, perhaps a dangerous person if crossed. I didn't understand her. The conversation upset me slightly and I looked forward, more than ever, to taking a walk with Bridget. I needed her warm, outgoing friendship now.

I was just beginning to think that Bridget would never appear when I heard her hurried footsteps approaching my door. She burst into the room with a breathless whoosh and just missed upsetting a small table. Her enthusiasm threatened to spill her head over heels. "From the looks of you, I'd say that you ran all the way." I was laughing with her, not at her, and she knew it.

"Aye, I did that," she said, "but with my two big left feet, it's a wonder that I made it without breaking my fool neck."

"Well, I'm all ready. Should we go now?" I didn't wait for an answer, but rather opened the door and waited for her to follow. She did quickly and the two of us went tripping down the stairs and out of the manor house. The change was astonishing, from the perpetual darkness of the manor to the bright refreshing daylight. My mood changed. I found myself enthusiastically looking forward to our tour. "It is beautiful outside. I didn't realize how beautiful it was."

"It's hard when you're on the inside. I know that well enough; that's why I pop outside whenever I can. You'll not be telling on me, would you? No, I know you wouldn't, but it's few that I do trust around here, if you catch my meaning." Her manner was completely open.

"I'll not peach on you, Bridget, you needn't worry about that. I certainly cannot blame you for wanting to get out into the clean air whenever you can, but let's not waste our time blabbing about inconsequentials. It's far too beautiful a day to spend just talking. Where should we start first?" I wanted to avoid further discussion about the do's and don'ts of the manor and she sensed my desire.

"There's a beautiful sight of the river from the top of the cliff; that is, if you've the stomach for heights. I often go there when I have the chance." She smiled suddenly and lowered her voice in the style of a conspirator. "It's a fine place to meet someone without having every eye in the neighborhood turned towards you, if you know what I mean."

From her wink, I guessed that she used that spot as a rendezvous to meet with the gatekeeper's son. It seemed that I had chosen an excellent guide for my first trip around the grounds. If there were a secluded place with some natural beauty, then she would be certain to know it. "You're the guide, so lead on and I'll follow right behind."

Bridget tossed her head in agreement and led me down a trail which branched off the main path and swung to the left. The pathway hugged the manor house until we came to a wrought-iron gate set into a grey stone wall, which boasted rusty spikes at its top and briars along the bottom. I thought we had come to the end of our short tour, but I was mistaken. Bridget knew her way around

the stone barrier. Behind an immense flowering shrub, there was a break in the wall, and it was through this opening that we passed.

"It's a bit tricky here, so you'd best be careful," said Bridget as she pointed to several deep ditches in the narrow trail.

"I'll manage." I followed close behind her. She was setting a rapid pace, now that we had passed the major obstacles, and I found it difficult to keep up. Finally, we arrived at a small clearing and stopped.

"Here's the very spot I was telling you about. From here you can see quite a ways along the river and, if you've a mind to, you can see the beach below. It's a lovely place, I'll be thinking, and private as well." From the sound of her last words, I could tell that she was staking a claim to this point and I understood the reason.

I walked over to the edge and looked down; the view was dizzyingly splendid. I could see the course of the river for miles around and I marveled at its power and glory. There was something majestic about the way it cut through the formidable rock, about its surging current. I had never seen so mighty a river before. Vermont had few if any of this magnitude, and the sight of it coursing along made me feel insignificant by comparison. I could almost imagine Henry Hudson and his son adrift on that vast expanse. It was strangely soothing.

Below the cliff, I could see a small beach surrounded by jutting rocks which challenged the river's power and which suffered its wrath by being pounded with boiling surf. It seemed an incredibly long drop to the beach below and the thought of it brought back the terror of my near escape from death. Had I fallen from my window, I would have fallen on those same rocks and been crushed beyond recognition. I tried to get my mind off the night's

incident. "I can see the beach, but I can't see how to reach it."

"There's only one way to get to it," she said. "You have to take the road from the manor down to the shore and then work your way around. It's a long trip and not one that I'd be taking often, although I took it once when I first arrived."

I could readily see what that trip involved. To reach the shore, I would have to take the carriage down to the main road and then turn to the left and follow another long winding trail down the side of the mountain upon which Haelstrom Manor perched. At the manor's gateway, the road branched into two separate paths, one to the small town and the other to the shoreline, which must have been used once as a small boat dock. However, the only remaining sign of the dock was some rotted timbers sticking out from the shore and what looked like a disused causeway. The beach itself looked attractive enough, and were it not for the difficulty in getting there, it would be a pleasant place for a picnic. I decided to ask if I could not be taken to the beach sometime.

"Well, now you've seen my favorite place. It's not much, but I like it nonetheless. Would you like to see Mr. Torder's garden now? It's lovely indeed." She was pleased that I liked *her* spot and so she was now offering me another.

"Yes, I would very much, Bridget, but do you think it would be all right with Mr. Torder? I mean it is *his* garden, isn't it?" I wanted to thank Torder for his lovely present, but didn't want to intrude upon him; he had made it clear that he resented any invasion of his privacy.

"Well, the garden is on your father's land, but you might say that it's Mr. Torder's own in a way. However,

you needn't fret about worrying Mr. Torder as he's not about right now. I saw him leave earlier this morning. He'll not be back for a day or two if I know him." She sensed that there had been some trouble between Torder and myself and so she attempted to reassure me. "He's fond of his garden he is, but he always welcomes anyone that cares to take an interest in it."

"Fine," I said, "then let's go see it. I'm sure it's beautiful." My last statement brought a shining smile to her face and she nodded her approval.

Once again, we threaded our way to the wall and made our way through the opening. Then, as I looked up at the manor, I thought I could see my window and something more. There was someone in my room; I was sure of it.

Someone was in my room looking down at us. I could actually feel the hatred pour down upon me. I couldn't see who it was, but I knew that someone was planning some evil. I was about to tell Bridget of my suspicions, but I realized that when she turned there would be no one there. The hidden searcher had disappeared. Perhaps it was all my imagination, but I didn't believe so. I had locked the door to my room on the way out. Unless there were other keys to that ancient lock, there must be another entrance. I decided to ask Bridget about that and now seemed the perfect time. "Bridget, would you happen to know if there are any additional keys to the door in my room?"

"Aye, mum, there's another, but I've got it here with me if you need it." Her tone was questioning.

"No, I don't need it right now," I said in as unconcerned a manner as I could manage. "I was just wondering." For some reason, I didn't want to explain my real

purpose for asking, but I could see that she didn't really accept my excuse.

"Is anything the matter, Miss Elizabeth? You seem to have gone pale. Are you not feeling well?" She was worried.

"No, I'm quite all right. I suppose it was the height that made me dizzy when I looked over the cliff. I'll be all right now, don't worry." I could well believe that I had lost my color, because Bridget's statement had confirmed my belief that there was another way into my room: a secret way. Someone in this house wanted me to suffer and that person was able to enter my bedroom when it pleased him to do so.

Bridget searched my face for some clue to what was bothering me, but finding none, she cheered up and once again bubbled with enthusiasm. "If you're feeling better now, then perhaps you'll want to see the garden. It's not far when you know the way, and I do." Saying this she took hold of my hand and the two of us walked briskly down the main path to the manor gate. True to her promise, it wasn't far at all. We reached the expanse of flowers within a few moments.

It was a small plot, but I could easily see that Torder had poured love and attention into making it serenely beautiful and alive with each color of the rainbow gloriously represented. There were trellises of roses, each more perfect than any I had ever seen before, as well as rows and rows of other flowers which I could not even name, but which moved me to oohs and aahs.

To the right of the garden, a narrow path seemed to wind upward towards the manor, but was hidden from view by a stand of willows. My curiosity got the best of me and I asked Bridget where the road led. She was quiet

for the space of a heartbeat, then told me that the path led to Mr. Torder's house. As if sensing my next question, she quickly volunteered the information that Torder did not stay at the manor, but rather maintained a small guest cottage which *all* considered as his own. I took this to mean that he himself considered it his own, but I didn't press the matter. We walked around the garden, examining the new blooms for a while, and then started back to the manor house along the main driveway. Suddenly we heard the sound of galloping horses and a carriage drew into sight.

"La, now I wonder who that could be? asked Bridget.

I was about to remark that I didn't have any idea when the carriage pulled to a stop beside us and I saw the smiling face of Dr. Talbot. "Can I offer you both a ride back to the house?" His gallantry pleased me, the more so as he offered the ride to both of us.

"Why yes, thank you. That would be very nice." I answered him gaily as, in truth, his return had cheered me considerably.

He motioned the driver to remain and dismounted from the carriage so that he could assist us into the outmoded cab, which I realized he must have rented to carry his things back to the manor house. He held out his hand and helped me into the carriage and then repeated the act for Bridget. Once the two of us were seated he joined us and the carriage started off again.

"Lucky for me that I was able to assist you. Were you taking a walk around the estate or just ambling to take the air?" His voice was pleasantly coated with concern.

"Bridget was taking me for a guided tour around the estate. It's far larger than I had imagined. As a matter of fact, your arrival was timed perfectly. I'm quite ex-

hausted." He searched my face quickly as I spoke and I could see that he was worried.

"You shouldn't push yourself at first," he said. "Remember, you've been through a considerable shock. You must take care of yourself. I don't mean to sound like a purveyor of gloom, but after all, I am a doctor and I do know whereof I speak." He smiled at me warmly and then turned to Bridget. "Bridget, would you take care of her? I'm afraid she's not willing to take care of herself, but you seem level-headed to me. Will you do it as a favor to me?"

Bridget looked at Dr. Talbot as if charmed and bobbed her head up and down in an animated fashion. "Oh yes, sir. I'll do just that and more if you ask it."

I gazed at the two of them intently, surprised at her honesty and at his obvious concern. The pair hit it off together immediately. I could discern a new and close bond between the two that I welcomed. At that moment, I saw that these two were very important to me and I gloried in the fact that they liked each other as well.

The carriage halted suddenly and threw me against Dr. Talbot with some force. I was about to speak when suddenly I heard someone shouting on the outside of the carriage. I couldn't understand the voice, but William must have, because he opened the door and jumped down. It was then that I got the full significance of what was being said. It was the cook and she was telling Dr. Talbot that my father was desperately ill. He had collapsed and she thought he might die. My father might die. The words struck at me and I reeled, but Bridget put her arms about me and supported me when I so needed her. I blessed her for that.

Dr. Talbot stuck his head in the swinging doorway and spoke rapidly. "Your father has had some type of an

attack. They've sent for a doctor from town, but he hasn't arrived yet, and so I'm going to see what I can do. Would you please hand me my medical bag?" There was urgency in his voice.

I handed him the bag. Before I could speak, he was off running to the manor house. The cook followed on his coat tails and left Bridget and me alone. Luckily, Bridget had far more composure than I; she yelled at the driver to hurry to the manor house. The carriage took off and in a moment we were there. I got down from the carriage and raced into the reception hall, Bridget behind me.

"Miss Elizabeth, you'll not be doing any good by barging about the house without any purpose. Won't you please sit down here? I'll try to find out where your father is. I'll be back in a moment. Please try and keep calm. I'm certain that the doctor will do everything that needs to be done." Her speech was direct and ultimately sensible and I reacted by sitting down in the indicated chair while she stood over me.

"Please, Bridget, please find out what you can. I won't move from this chair, I swear to you, but for the love of heaven, find out what you can." I was close to tears, but managed to control myself. Bridget paused for a second to be sure of it and then raced up the stairs. I was alone.

My thoughts swirled and pulsed with horror as I thought about this latest tragedy. Was my father also to die? No, it couldn't happen, I wouldn't let it happen, but what could I do besides sit here and worry? I could pray. Yes, I could pray. The love of a father I had never known became the most precious thing in the world to me and I knelt and pleaded for his recovery. I was still kneeling when I heard footsteps behind me. I straight-

ened up at once. It was Bridget and she was smiling. Thank God; she was smiling.

"Your father will be all right, Miss Elizabeth. He's calling for you. Will you come with me?" She held out her hand to me and I followed her. I didn't trust myself to speak as yet.

Chapter Nine

Dr. Talbot was waiting for us at the top of the stairs. His expression was unreadable, but I thought I could detect a note of puzzlement as he spoke. "It's all right, Elizabeth. He's in no danger now. I've given him a mild sedative to calm him down. He's all right."

"Thank God! Can I see him now?" I searched his face carefully, trying to gauge the extent of my father's illness in the doctor's eyes; they told me nothing, but warned me that he was holding something back from me.

"I don't think that would be advisable right now," he said soothingly, "but I'm sure that you can see him later in the evening, perhaps after dinner. I assure you he's all right. He just needs to rest a bit." He was trying hard to put me at my ease, too hard.

"Doctor, William, you're not telling me the whole truth. I can see it in your eyes. There's no use in your lying. What are you keeping from me and why?" My accusation hit the mark and he winced. He was lying to me, I knew.

"Elizabeth, you're far too upset to realize what you're saying. I've already told you that your father will be perfectly all right and I'm certainly not lying about that, so try and get a hold on yourself. You'll be able to see him later this evening, I promise you." He spoke rapidly, but he was evading my questions.

"Dr. Talbot, I assure you that I'm not a complete child. I do know when someone is not telling me the truth. I don't mean to accuse you of anything, but you leave me no choice." It hurt me to have to speak in this manner, but I had to. "Please tell me the truth and don't try to spare me anything, because you're only adding to my distress by your silence. I've got to know. Please!"

For a second he looked as though he were going to continue in the same vein, but then he changed his mind. I was shaking slightly. He put his strong hands on my shoulders and held me at arm's length. His tone was soft and sincere. "I'm truly sorry that I caused you to doubt my honesty. I'd like to make up for that if I can. Elizabeth, the truth of the matter is that I honestly do not know what your father's collapse signifies. I've examined him as thoroughly as he would permit, but I'm not at all certain as to what it was that caused his faint. His heart seems perfect. That's the main thing. It's entirely possible that this was a mild reoccurrence of some tropical disease, but I don't like to make a diagnosis without the relevant data, and that's the difficulty. Your father's not being very cooperative. I can't really blame him. He has his own personal physician and I suppose he'll confide in him when he arrives." His every word was honest and he could see that I accepted that. He relaxed somewhat. "There is one thing that puzzles me, though. Your father seems to have several small cuts on his hands. Unless I'm very much mistaken, those cuts were caused by thorns of some sort. I asked him about them and he practically threw me out of the room. What do you make of that?"

His hands cut by thorns? Roses have thorns and there were roses in my room, the room which someone had entered in my absence. Was it my father then who had

entered my room and gazed hatefully down at me? Why, why should he hate me? The question welled up within me and for an instant I thought I was in danger of fainting. I could feel a cold chilling sensation grip my heart. "I'm not sure, but it may mean quite a lot. However, I'd rather not talk about my suspicions until I've made certain that I'm not just imagining things. I know that I owe you more explanation than that, but please don't press me for any answers as yet. When I'm certain, I'll tell you."

"I won't press you for any information, Elizabeth. It's apparent to me that you have your reasons for remaining silent about this and I trust you to tell me when you're ready." He held me securely as he spoke. I could feel his strength flow into me and support me. "Now, if you'll trust me a bit more, I'd like to make a suggestion. You've been through a considerable shock and in view of past events, that shock could be serious. I'm going to have a sedative sent to your room. I want you to take it immediately. It's very mild, but it will enable you to relax and perhaps sleep for an hour or two. Will you obey doctor's orders?"

"Must I?" I questioned seriously.

"Yes, I think you must. There's no need to make such a face. The medication won't taste bad and it will help. Don't worry, you'll be up and about in a few hours and you'll feel worlds better for it. Agreed?" He was speaking lightly, but I sensed the deep concern that underlay his words.

"I suppose I must, if it's doctor's orders, but I do detest foul-tasting elixirs. I'm holding you to your word. I shall expect it to be quite delicious." I tried to equal his joking tone. "I want to thank you for all you've done. You've been truly wonderful and I hope that I can make it up to you. Thank you again, William."

He took his hands off my shoulders and looked deeply into my eyes; his glance felt like a caress. "Elizabeth, you owe me nothing. In fact, I owe you quite a lot. Offhand, I would say that you owe that thanks to Bridget. She was the one who settled you when you needed it the most. You've made a lifelong friend in that girl. I dare say that she would defend you to the death. That's quite a compliment to you, because she's far too open to pretend to feel what she doesn't. Friendship of that nature is more precious than most people realize." He paused to highlight that statement and then took my hand in his. "I want you to go to your room now, and when the medicine arrives, take it promptly. I've got to go and see to my baggage, but I'll see you at dinner. Until then . . ."

I said goodbye to him for the present and then walked down the darkened corridor to my room. The door *was* locked. I used my key and swung it open on its hinges, but for a moment remained in the hall, unable or unwilling to enter. I was afraid of the nameless terror that stalked the room. But I could see no way to avoid it; I couldn't just remain in the corridor.

The roses were gone, but the vase was smashed and the shards were scattered over the floor with mad abandon. I understood now where the cuts on my father's hands had come from; it was he who had destroyed the one touch of beauty in this otherwise cold room. Why had he done this? It made absolutely no sense. The more I thought about it, the more confused I became. The roses themselves were unimportant, but this was an act of hatred and that most definitely was. A hatred that could wantonly destroy such delicate beauty was quite capable of the attempt on my own life. It had been my father who had attacked me that night; I could no longer doubt that. But what reason could he have for wanting me dead? If

that were his wish, why then did he send for me? A host of unanswerable questions tormented and robbed me of security. What was I to do?

Without realizing it, I had been pacing the floor in a circle. As my path approached the door, I heard someone stop outside. My instinctive reaction was to wait silently, but then I realized that it must be Bridget with the medication. I was right. She was carrying a small silver tray upon which rested a glass of what I assumed to be the sedative. She put the tray down on my dresser and carried the glass over to me.

"If you'll be taking this draught now, I'll return the glass to the kitchen. I hope you won't be giving me any trouble about taking the medicine. Dr. Talbot said I was to stand right here until you swallowed it. Now, be a good girl and take it quickly." She was speaking at a rapid clip to avoid any objections that I might have and she accomplished that feat excellently.

I took the glass from her and downed its contents in one gulp. It wasn't foul-tasting at all, for which I thanked the doctor's honesty, but Bridget's performance deserved some sort of an encore, so I made a face at her and wrinkled my nose. My pretended discomfort brought a broad smile to her features and she giggled.

"Oh, it wasn't that bad, was it?" she asked.

"No, it wasn't, but I didn't want to disappoint you after your lecture. Now you can tell the doctor that I took my medicine without too much complaint. Thank you for bringing it, Bridget." I watched her nod in agreement as she took the glass from my hand. Her presence here, at this moment, was very comforting. I was beginning to feel the effect of the sedative, and as I grew sleepier, my thoughts became fuzzy. I was so very sleepy.

"I think it would be best if you took off your cloak and lay down on the bed. Here, let me help you." She helped me to take off my cloak and then assisted me to the bed. "Now, you just close your eyes and try to relax. You'll feel much better for it when you wake up. Just relax . . . just relax . . . just rela . . ."

I could hear her crooning to me, but her voice seemed to be fading; each second that labored past drew me into a world of inner silence. The last thing I remembered her saying was something about the roses, and then I was fast asleep. Asleep, but awake to hideous dreams.

Phantoms of my imagination crept close to my bed and hovered over me with evil grimaces distorting their features. I wanted to call out, tried to call out, but no sound came from my throat and my futile attempts only made them increase their efforts. It was all so confusing; why were these fell demons cavorting around me? What had I done to excite their terrible enmity? I tried to see behind their leering masks, but their identities still escaped me. I couldn't doubt that they wished my destruction, but why, why, why?

"*You should be dead!*"

"*You will be dead!*"

"*Why did you come back to life?*"

"*Why did you come?*"

"*Why?*"

"*Why?*"

"Leave me alone! Why must you torment me? I've never done anything to harm you. Please! Please leave me in peace!" I awoke suddenly to find myself screaming at the empty air; the phantoms were gone, but the dread of their awful reappearance kept me frighteningly alert. They'd seemed so real in every way and their threaten-

ing parody of speech sent shivers through my body. They were imaginary, but one thing about them was all too real; someone wanted me dead. Could that someone be my own father? No! No! No!

Chapter Ten

It was as black as pitch outside my window and for the moment, I was completely lost. This wasn't my house, not my room, but then, what was I doing here? I felt the urge to cry out my doubts and fears, scream my terror to the night. However, the truth slowly dawned on me and I relaxed. *I was home*. Haelstrom Manor was now my home, for better or worse, and I must have slept through the afternoon due to the drug.

What time was it? I searched the table for a candle and, finding one, lit it and glanced at the huge sun-burst style clock on the wall. It was six o'clock, so I must have slept for at least three hours. I didn't know what time dinner was served here, but common sense told me that Bridget would surely wake me in time for my first meal with the family. I wasn't at all hungry, but I desperately felt the need for company. I dressed for dinner quickly and left my room.

The manor seemed broodingly silent and this served to increase my disquiet and stir my foreboding. By now, I was becoming adapted to the constant darkness and my eyes no longer strained to identify every shadow. Nevertheless, I could almost touch the waiting evil as I paced down the hall; that I could not adapt to and I cringed within my soul. My life at the manor had been a series of frightening incidents, each unseeable and without reason.

I increased my pace as I came to the end of the hall, because the thought of remaining in the unknown shadows of this seemingly empty part of the manor was abhorrent to me in the extreme. The sooner I reached the dining room, the sooner I would be able to feel the security of company; I needed that security.

I was about to go down the stairs when I heard a hushed conversation taking place around the corner from me. Propriety suggested that I continue along my way, but I found that my curiosity would not allow me to accede to the demands of courtesy. As quietly as I could, I moved closer to the voices and listened carefully. I could not make out exactly what they were talking about, but I did recognize the sultry tones of my stepmother; the other was unknown to me.

"That was a damn fool thing to do. He certainly should know better than to take an overdose. What was he trying to do, kill himself?" Whoever was speaking, he was definitely angry. "I'll thank you to remember that I'm a doctor, not some paid lackey that comes running whenever I'm summoned to bring him out of these spells. I won't do it again, I assure you, and he'd better keep that in mind."

"Doctor, it was an accident," said Consuelo smoothly. "A simple mistake, no more than that. I sent for you, because we respect your knowledge and because you know so very *much* the difficulties in this case. Please, doctor, don't be angry." She was trying to calm the doctor down, but she wasn't succeeding.

"I've said all that I'm going to about this and I repeat that I will no longer answer any summons from this house. Goodnight, madame." His attitude sounded final and although I could hear Consuelo begging him to reconsider, he had evidently made up his mind. He said

goodnight once more and then stamped off. I was afraid they would have to pass me on the way out, but they went down the other staircase and I was left by myself, left to attempt to understand what had just transpired. There was little that I could make of the conversation, but I was left with the definite impression that my father's condition had been caused by an overdose of some medication. That in itself was strange, but I sensed that it tied in with Torder's visit to the dilapidated home of Dr. Moose in Albany. He'd brought some package back with him, a package that my father had considered more important than meeting his daughter. I was sure that these incidents were related, but the how and why completely escaped me. Hadn't Torder made some derisive comment about the package? Yes, he had, but what was the meaning of that whole sequence?

"Saints preserve me," said Bridget in a startled gush. "I was just coming to wake you and I didn't see you at all until you popped up in front of me. Gave me quite a start, you did."

Any shock that I may have caused her was mild in comparison to my own. I had been so intent on the conversation between my stepmother and the doctor, that Bridget's sudden appearance threw me into a cave of panic. I narrowly avoided a gasp and swallowed my fear. "I'm afraid that you've done the same to me with a vengeance; my heart was half in my mouth." I paused to collect my composure. "I was unsure of what hour dinner was to be served and so I decided to come down on my own. I am sorry that I frightened you, thought; that wasn't my intention."

"That's quite all right, mum, I wouldn't think it was." She saw that I didn't understand her last comment. "I mean that I wouldn't think you would be scaring the life

out of me on purpose. It's the blasted darkness that gives me the jitters and I'm forever jumping out of my skin at the slightest sound. Ah well, I'll get used to it sooner or later. Would you be going down now?"

"Yes, I'd like to get out of the darkness myself. Is there anyone else down there?" I asked this hoping that perhaps William would have already come down.

"Dr. Talbot is there now, but I suppose your father and *stepmother* will be down soon." She stressed "stepmother" with what I could only imagine was venom.

"Then I'll join the doctor downstairs. By the way, would you happen to know who the doctor was who just visited my father? I didn't catch his name." I tried to disguise my real interest, but she detected it.

"I believe his name is Dr. Blodget," she said. "I've seen him here once or twice, but your father would be knowing more about the man than I do. If you'll forgive me, Miss Elizabeth, I've got to be getting back to the kitchen or *herself* will be having my head."

"Certainly, Bridget," I said. "I'll walk down with you if you don't mind."

She gave me one of her warm fleeting smiles and led the way down the flight of stairs. I was thankful for her company, even for that short time, and William's sentiments about friendship were brought home to me with interest. As we approached the dining room, she parted from me and went to the kitchen, which left me on my own again. I entered the dining room and found William tracing some sort of design on the wall with his finger. He was completely absorbed in his activity and didn't appear to notice my arrival until I came within a few feet of him; then he spun about and stared at me. I had surprised him and he registered that fact visibly.

"Elizabeth, you startled me for a moment," he said. "I didn't expect you this soon. Are you feeling better?"

"Much better, thank you," I answered. "I suppose I needed the sleep far more than I realized. But tell me, what were you doing when I entered? It looked to me as though you were trying to . . . well, look for something on the wall?" At my question, he looked at me sharply for an instant, but then smiled and appeared to relax.

"I was just examining the texture of the stone in this section of the wall. It doesn't fit in with the general plans of the manor and I was curious as to the reason. Couldn't find any answer though. Strange." For the second time in a very few hours, I got the feeling that he was holding something back from me; not lying exactly, but not telling the whole truth.

"I'd forgotten that you were interested in old buildings," I said placatingly. "I would think that a house like this should give you plenty of opportunity to satisfy your interest. I was told that the manor was once a fort. From the outside, I'd say it's still a fort. When I was walking with Bridget, I was surprised to find that there wasn't any easy way to reach the beach from the manor. The only way to get there is to take the winding road around the mountain. I wonder why they didn't construct a flight of stairs down the side of the mountain? It would seem reasonable. There's a small boat dock down there and I would think they'd want some easy way to get to the fort from below. Could you explain that?"

He considered my question for a moment and then answered. "I'm afraid that you're thinking in terms of picnics, not war. It wouldn't do to have an enemy squadron walk up the side of the cliff and attack the de-

fenders. This fort was made inaccessible for a distinct purpose—to prevent an attack from below. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, it does. You're quite right, I *was* thinking about a picnic. But I guess it's not such a difficult trip to the beach if we use the carriage. Perhaps we can have a small picnic there soon; I'd like that very much." When I'd first met him, he'd expressed an interest in the manor, but I had thought that merely an excuse to make conversation in lieu of conventional social small talk. I was mistaken; he was interested in the manor and perhaps in me also. That was a pleasant thought and I held on to it.

We talked for a short time, commenting on the weather, the architecture of the house, and other neutral subjects, but no mention was made of my father's illness nor of the unusual circumstances surrounding the attack. We were both avoiding the subject, for reasons of our own. The entrance of Consuelo saved us from further intrigue.

She came in with Dr. Blodget by her side. She was dressed, as usual, in black, but she had managed to make that somber color appear festive by the addition of a thick chain of pearls and a diamond brooch, which caught the candlelight and reflected its own inner fire. As she walked towards us, the black lace trail of her dress swept the floor, but disclosed her tiny black patent-leather shoes beneath its hem. Her lustrous hair was highlighted by a pearl comb and the total effect was one of stunning beauty.

The doctor walked next to Consuelo, but he did not appear too pleased to have to do so; his expression was somewhat grim, which only made him seem more ruffled than his otherwise unkempt appearance would have.

He was a small, fat man, and this added to Consuelo's beauty by comparison.

"Elizabeth, I should like to introduce Dr. Blodget. Dr. Blodget, this is my stepdaughter, Miss Elizabeth Halsley, and the other gentleman is Dr. Talbot, her friend." Consuelo spoke formally, but beneath the words, I could sense tension.

The pitiful little man gave us a nodding smile and tried to assume what he considered a proper professional stance; he didn't succeed. "How do you do, Miss Halsley? I've heard your father speak of you many times in the past. I'm glad to meet you at last." It was of course, an obvious lie, but his tone was friendly. "Dr. Talbot? I don't recall hearing that name before. Are you in practice around here?"

"No, I've only just completed my training in Boston," answered William gently. "I've not yet decided where I shall open my practice, but I imagine it will be in Vermont."

Consuelo stepped in to save the doctor from making any more unfortunate comments. She acted the gracious hostess to us all by offering us canapes and refreshments. After some chitchat, we seated ourselves and commenced our dinner, which, thanks to cook, was excellent. There was an empty place setting for my father, but he did not come down and everyone carefully avoided any mention of his absence. It was a strangely quiet meal. Each of us seemed intent on his own thoughts. What little conversation there was tended to be dull and disinterested. However, once or twice, Dr. Blodget made some remark about my father's illness, which caused Consuelo to look in his direction sharply and give him a warning stare. At each indiscretion, the doctor became more and more confused until finally he made some statement about having

to return to the town and left the room. His departure eased the tension.

The doctor seemed happy to leave and I wondered why he hadn't left before. For over an hour, he had made us all feel uncomfortable by his constant social blunders. I had seen the anger which Consuelo directed at him, and I tried to reconcile this with what I had previously overheard in the hall. Somehow, she had managed to persuade him not to leave at that time and she seemed to be regretting this now. I didn't understand the unspoken challenges she had thrown at him, but I could sense that she was covering up information about my father's condition. This prompted me to ask her when my father would be down. She told me shortly and then, excusing herself, left the room.

"That man is either an incredible fool or else an absolute liar. Tropical fever indeed! Your father hasn't a temperature and so that eliminates any such fever. He may be a doctor, but I'd hate to trust any friend of mine to his care." I could easily understand William's outburst. The blundering Dr. Blodget had treated him as if he was still a schoolboy rather than a graduate doctor.

"What is wrong with my father, Bill? Please tell me. I know you said that you weren't certain, but you do seem to know now, and I do want to know. Please?" My voice trembled on the verge of desperation.

"Elizabeth, all I know is that your father is a very sick man, but I can't say more than that yet. I'm not trying to be secretive, just honest. Remember, I haven't had a great deal of experience and your father's condition is too complicated to make any wild guesses. I'll need more time to consider my suspicions." His honesty was evident.

"Oh Bill, why must everything around here be clouded and uncertain? I only wanted to be with my fa-

ther and make up for all the time we were apart, but it seems so impossible now. Maybe it's the house, I don't know, but I feel as if someone here doesn't want me to be happy. I'm probably being ridiculously silly, but I feel it with each beat of my heart. Why does it have to be this way?" The tears streamed down my cheeks as I spoke. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't help myself; I'm so unhappy."

He walked over to me and held me in his arms tenderly. "Beth, don't feel that way. You've been through so much already and things are bound to get better. You're too beautiful to redden your eyes with tears. Here, let me help you." He took out his handkerchief, wiped the tears away, then held me close again. "I think I know something of what you've been through since the death of Alicia, but I know that she would want your happiness more than anything else and you know it also. If she were here, she would tell you to think of the happy times in the past and to let that help you face the present. If you'll permit me, I'd like to help make the future brighter than that past and infinitely happier than the present. You mean a great deal to me, Beth, a great deal."

My head was against his chest as he spoke, but when I heard him speak of our future together, I drew back slightly and looked into his eyes. There was love there, love for me, and I thrilled to it. My depression lifted. The tenderness of his touch brought me to the heights of joy. He was saying that he cared and that echoed my own thoughts and dreams perfectly. "I don't think the mistress of Chatsworth School would approve of what you've just intimated, but I don't give a fig; I want you to be here with me and if that's scandalous, then let it be." I was being terribly forward, but the love I had seen in his eyes gave me the courage to speak out.

He looked at me and laughed warmly. "You look so beautiful when you smile. I hope you always will smile when you're with me. Beth, I want you with me always."

He put his hand under my chin to raise my head so that he could kiss me, but suddenly we heard the sound of approaching footsteps and he dropped his hand. It was my father.

He entered the dining room and strode over to me with an expression of anger on his face. "Elizabeth, I won't have you receiving the attentions of Mr. Torder. It's inexcusable of him and quite foolish of you in these circumstances. Do I make myself quite clear?" He glared at me. "Do I?"

My father's rage made me recoil from him. "No, you do not," I said heatedly. "What are you suggesting? If you're intimating that my relations with Torder have been anything but proper, then you are mistaken. You've no right to make such accusations, no right at all." The injustice of his remarks made me scream out my denials.

My father's expression changed from rage to confusion. He had not expected such a forthright answer from me and became flustered. "But he sent you flowers. It's not the first time he's done that and—"

"Not the first time?" I asked incredulously. "What are you talking about? I've never received anything from him before. In fact, I'm not even sure that he sent them in the first place; there was no card. I don't understand why you're behaving this way; I thought you wanted me here with you, but ever since I've arrived, you've ignored me completely. Why, father, why?"

"The first time? But I thought that . . ." His voice trailed off. He seemed suddenly to realize that I was his daughter, not his former wife. He had thought me to be my mother and this more than anything else showed how

ill he was. "Beth, I'm so sorry. I don't know what made me act that way, but you're wrong; I do love you and want you here. I haven't been at all well recently. Sometimes the past seems more real to me than the present. Please believe me, I do want you here and I am terribly sorry that I've caused you any unhappiness. Can you ever forgive my stupidity?"

I could not help answering his pathetic plea. "Of course, I forgive you, father; you don't have to ask. But won't you let William help you also? He's an excellent doctor, I know, and I'm sure he can assist you if you'll permit him."

"Sir, I don't mean to intrude, but perhaps I *can* help you. I know I've just recently completed training, but I've studied under some of the finest men in the profession and it certainly wouldn't hurt to see. It's up to you, of course." Bill was trying his best to help, but it was futile.

"Thank you, Dr. Talbot, for your generous offer, but I've my own personal physician. I'm quite certain that he's competent to handle my case." My father's tone was formal and distinctly cold. "Well now, Beth, if Dr. Talbot will forgive us, I would like to get acquainted with my daughter, a daughter I've sadly neglected. Will you forgive us, doctor?"

William uttered a polite, "Certainly," and left the room quickly. I did want to talk to my father and realized that William's presence would only make him maintain his formality, which I didn't want. Nevertheless, William's departure saddened me.

"He seems to be a fine young man, a trifle rash perhaps, but sincere and fine. Does it surprise you that I think so?" My father asked this in a quiet, warmer voice.

"Yes, it does considerably," I answered.

"I think you'll find that my bark is far worse than my

bite when you know me better. And you shall know me better." He put his hands on my shoulders and held me at arms' length. "Elizabeth, I've put you through the hoop, I'm afraid. If you'll sit next to me on the divan, I'll try to explain my behavior." He held my hand as we walked to the horsehair sofa, then seated himself next to me. "But bear with me, will you?" The question was purely rhetorical. "It hasn't been easy for me to accept the reality that I have a full-grown daughter. Your resemblance to your mother adds to the difficulties. As you must have gathered by now, your mother and I were not very happy together. Seeing you gave me quite a shock. I'd prefer not to belabor the past, but I must make you understand that the years have been very lonely and I've grown accustomed to being by myself, which perhaps explains what you've thought of as disinterest. I'm not disinterested in you, to the contrary, but I'm at a loss to know how to approach you. Does that sound so foolish?"

"Oh no, father," I replied instantly. "I think I do understand what you mean, only try and think of me as an individual. I am myself and I want to be loved for myself alone."

"I shall try, Beth," he said gently. "There's something I must say and I'm going to say it only once and then drop the subject once and for all. Your mother was an ambitious and calculating woman who nearly destroyed every vestige of respect and kindness I once had for her. Our short time together was fraught with arguments and corrosive emotions, which threatened every fiber of my sanity and turned me into a social hermit. I'm sorry to have to say this, but you deserve to know the truth."

"You haven't shocked me, father. Dr. Andrews told me much the same story before I left Vermont and so I'm

prepared to accept it now. We needn't discuss it any further." It hurt me to speak of this, but how much more must he have suffered!

"I remember Dr. Andrews very well. He was the only friend I had when I was courting your mother and that friendship caused him to lose his own suit. He was very much in love with your aunt, but when he took my side, she declined his proposal and broke his heart. I never could completely understand your aunt's attitude, but I can't find it in my heart to blame her for what she did to me. She was trying to protect you in the best way she knew. That's the important thing now. The past is dead and we have the future together." As he spoke, tears formed in his eyes. "I want it to be a full and happy future, Elizabeth, but you'll have to help me to make it so. You know that I'm practically blind in the daylight, which is the reason that the manor is kept darkened, but there's no reason why you should have to suffer for my infirmities. Counsuelo has already mentioned her plan for a party for you and I heartily approve. A pretty young thing like yourself needs music, dancing, and all the tumult of youth. The party is a start in the right direction. Would you like that?"

The change in my father's aspect was so great that for the moment I was overwhelmed. "I think it would be very nice indeed, father, and thank you."

"It's Consuelo whom you should thank," he said pointedly. The mention of my stepmother caused him to become serious once again. "Elizabeth, I want you to get along with Consuelo. I realize that you must find it difficult to accept her as your mother, but after what she's sacrificed, she deserves every kindness. I mean that, Beth, it's very important to me."

"Sacrificed?" I asked, "I don't understand."

He stared at me intently. "I thought you knew. Near the end of the war, Don Alverez knew that I had sufficient information to insure his arrest and execution for the inhumanities that he had practiced on the prisoners in his keeping. That knowledge goaded him into trying to murder me in my cell. He came down into the dungeon and attempted to kill me with his pistol, but I managed to avoid his first shot and shot him before he could fire again." He paused as if reliving the episode. "It was Consuelo who gave me the pistol and warned me of her father's intentions. She saved my life."

The enormousness of what my father was relating washed me with waves of confusion. He was saying that Consuelo was partly responsible for the death of Don Alverez and wholly responsible for saving my father's life. No wonder she was always dressed in black; she was in perpetual mourning for her father. "I didn't know."

"I don't remember the exact chain of events. I was quite ill at the time. But I do remember that she saved my life at an incredible cost to herself. After the hostilities ended, I brought my *wife* home to Haelstrom Manor and I want you to see that it's her home as well as your own. I want you two to be friends." His voice again took on a pleading tone and his eyes begged me for understanding.

"We will be, father, we will be. I promise you that I will try my best. I'm certain that we will be friends." I answered his plea with the sincerity of my heart and I could see that he recognized my desire.

"Yes, I'm certain that you will. Well, that's enough of the gloomy side of life. Consuelo tells me that you will need an entirely new wardrobe and she has mentioned her intention to take you to Albany to purchase it. I'm entirely in agreement. I want you to know that you're

to get the best of everything. You see, I happen to be a very wealthy man, thanks to the business sense of my parents, and I want you to take advantage of that wealth to satisfy your every whim. I mean that, Beth. I've discussed the plans for the party and I dare say that I still have enough social position in this state to insure that there'll be a rush of acceptances to the invitations. It should be quite the event of the season. I want it to be so for your sake; you deserve all the social recognition that I can provide. As the plan stands, you will leave for Albany tomorrow night, which will get you there in the morning in plenty of time for shopping. It shouldn't take more than a day or two and then you can return here to your young man. How does that sound?"

"Father, he's not my young man," I laughed. "I do care for him, that's true, but it hasn't gone further than that as yet. The plan sounds wonderful to me. It should be loads of fun; shopping and seeing the sights will certainly be a change from my life in Vermont or at school. I'm looking forward to it." My voice sounded my enthusiasm.

"Fine, then I'll tell her that you agree to the plans and put everything in motion. I suppose you'll have to get ready for the trip so I'll bid you good evening. Sleep well, dear; I'll see you tomorrow night before you leave. Good night, Elizabeth." He leaned over, kissed me on the forehead, then rose. "When you wish to go to your room, you can ring for Bridget; I mention this because unfortunately the manor was never quite completed and there are numerous faults in the floor which could be dangerous. Perhaps, now that you've come to be with me, we'll have it taken care of; it's long overdue. You've no idea how many cracks, crevices, and tunnels there are, thanks to the haphazard way the house was constructed. Even I

don't know all of them. So be very careful when you explore, all right?"

"I'll be careful, father. I promise." I smiled, then waved him goodnight as he left the room. His last comment about tunnels sent chills up my spine. I remembered my suspicions about a secret entrance into my room. Dangerous? It had nearly proved fatal to me and I still couldn't rid myself of the thought that he was somehow involved in the affair. When I had opened the door after the attempted murder, it was my father I had seen walking down the hall and it was he who had destroyed the roses in my room; there wasn't any doubt in my mind as to the truth of those statements. I didn't want to believe it, but how could I not when everything pointed to him? Everything, even the fact that he thought of me as my mother, whom he had hated.

I decided to walk to my room by myself as I wanted to think things through, so I picked up a candle from the table and set off. Once inside my room, I locked the door with my key and threw the heavy bolt to secure it, although I now had little confidence in its ability to protect me. I had learned many strange things this evening, not the least of which was Consuelo's part in my father's survival. She had traded her father's life for his and the very concept of having to make such a choice was frightening. No wonder she was explosive. Who could blame her after what she must have suffered? Yes, there were many things that defied explanation, but I began to feel the drain of the past hours, and so I prepared for bed. Perhaps the morning would bring some answers I could understand.

I found it difficult to sleep, difficult to erase the terror and heartache of the past from my thoughts. Finally the sheer weight of exhaustion overcame me. I drifted off.

One stray thought kept rattling around in my head and I awoke a few moments later to consider it. Of course! We were going to Albany! Torder's sister lived in Albany. I would have the chance to question her about my mother and about my father's troubles. Torder wouldn't be there to shush her this time; I'd learn what I needed to learn. With that resolve, I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter Eleven

It was a magnificent morning. The birds sang their appreciation with soft melodious trills to the rising sun as the sky brightened, the clear fresh air further stirring their joyous song.

The birds singing? I awoke with a start and turned to face the window, which was open and swinging gently in the breeze. I lay on my bed staring at that window until finally I managed to control my rampant fear and wipe the haze of sleep from my eyes. It had been locked when I fell asleep, but now it was open—opened by someone who had entered while I was sleeping. Perhaps, in the stress of last evening, I had neglected to secure it. The more I thought about it the more I realized that I was creating a monster out of my imagination. Had I really locked it? I couldn't remember.

I rose from the bed and spent a few moments deciding what dress to wear for the morning. If the warbling birds were an indication of the day's promise, it would be warm and cheerful, so I decided on a light yellow frock. It was brand new and, I thought, quite attractive, but I'd be able to judge that better when I saw Bill. I wanted to look beautiful for him. I primped and preened before my dresser mirror until I was satisfied with the result. I opened the door, then turned about to check the room to make certain that I hadn't forgotten anything. I had. I'd

left my blue velvet cloak hanging in the closet. I knew that I might well need it to go outside, for there was always a strong wind blowing near the river. I hadn't made any definite plans for the morning, but I thought it might be pleasant to have a picnic lunch—that is, if I could persuade Bill to accompany me. I thought I could, so I picked up the cloak and left the room.

I arrived at the dining room just in time to greet Bill as he entered from another door. He was dressed in a topcoat and so I imagined that he must have been outside before breakfast. But what amazed me was the fact that in his hands he held a large bouquet of yellow roses. Where on earth could he have gotten them?

"I thought you might like these," he said as he placed the bouquet down on the table. "You needn't look so surprised. They're from Mr. Torder's garden and I didn't steal them; he gave them to me. Seems quite an interesting fellow."

"I didn't know he was on the estate," I said with a slight note of puzzlement in my voice. "Bridget said that he wasn't expected back for a few days." I walked over to the table and held one of the roses up to inhale its lingering fragrance. "They're beautiful. I do like them very very much. Thank you, Bill, for thinking of them."

He gave me a brilliant smile and took me by the hand as we approached the breakfast table, then held out the chair for me to sit down. He was a perfect gentleman and, more, he was *my* gentleman. As we faced each other across the table, I could see by his eyes that he thoroughly approved of my dress; it added to the heightening cheer that was rapidly dissolving the gloom of the past days. The love I saw in his eyes blended with the love I felt in my heart and the result was happiness beyond my wildest expectations.

Cook came out of the kitchen and served us an immense breakfast of eggs, kippers, bacon, and steaming hot rolls freshly baked, which we consumed with ravenous speed. It was clear that she enjoyed the gusto with which we ate. She smiled at us both constantly as she served us. Her anger of the previous day had vanished. She gloried in her domain. Everything seemed filled with splendor this morning and I prayed that it would continue so.

The meal finished, we remained at the table and dawdled over a last cup of thick black coffee, while cook cleared the table and fussed over us. Finally, Bill winked at me and gave cook a flashing smile. "That's what I call food fit for a king, a very fortunate king at that. You've outdone yourself, cook. On behalf of Miss Halsley and myself, I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart and stomach." His phrases were lofty, but there was a sincerity to them as well, which didn't escape cook; she beamed.

"Why, thank you, doctor, that's fine of you to say that. There's a touch of the blarney stone in you, but I like it well enough and that's for sure. Could I be doing anything else for you?" She was extremely pleased with us and her question was asked in hopes of being able to reciprocate.

"As a matter of fact, there is," said Bill gallantly. "Being that it's such a beautiful day, I was thinking that Miss Halsley might enjoy a picnic down by the beach, which you could certainly add to by preparing a basket lunch for us; that is, if it's not too difficult for you to manage. It seems a shame to remain inside on a day like this. Could you do that for us? We really would appreciate it."

"Certainly, doctor," she replied happily. "It'd be no trouble at all. If you'll give me half an hour, I'll pack the finest lunch you've ever eaten and that's a promise."

She gave Bill another pot of coffee and returned to the kitchen to prepare our promised feast. We could hear her singing as she banged the pots and pans and the sound of it added to the pleasure of the morning.

"You must be a mentalist," I said half seriously. "How did you ever guess that I was thinking of a picnic by the riverside? I was going to surprise you with the suggestion and here you've ruined it." I was jokingly crestfallen.

"It wasn't too difficult after your question about the missing staircase on the cliff," he replied. "It's a perfect day for it. Besides, I wanted to get you to myself for a short while. You see, I've purely ulterior motives, though they're entirely honorable, I assure you." He was absolutely serious.

It was incredible, but true. He was telling me in his own way that he wanted to marry me. That's what he meant by "honorable intentions," and, though I should have been shocked by this proposal, I wasn't; it seemed completely natural. I believe I had loved him from the moment we met, but his love in return was more than I could have hoped for this soon. My heart was beating wildly. I didn't want to expose my elation as I wanted to be on firmer ground first, so I covered my confusion by talking about inconsequentials. He sensed my reasoning and helped me through this period by pretending that nothing unusual had happened. I was immeasurably happy and he knew it.

"If we're to go on a picnic, we'll need the carriage," I exclaimed. "I'm afraid that I don't even know where the stable is. Perhaps we'd better ask cook if my father is still up so that we can get his permission."

"I doubt that he's awake, but you needn't worry about propriety; I talked with him after you retired and he told me that I should try and see that you are entertained. I'm

certain that he would approve of our plans, so don't worry about that. As for the carriage, I've already arranged for it to be brought around." He was completely relaxed about the conversation with my father, but I wondered about it. What had they discussed?

Cook appeared and presented us with a heavy laden basket from which delicious aromas were wafting. She was all smiles, from ear to ear, and I saw with a start that she now looked on us as veritable honeymooners. It was a disquieting look, but wonderfully gracious. We thanked her, then left the manor. The carriage was waiting for us outside the front door, the jet-black horses pawing the ground with an eagerness to be off. Bill helped me in and then we were off to the beach, to our picnic, to our future together. How happy I was!

The morning was beautiful and the afternoon even more so. We picnicked and talked about our pasts, the past becoming the present, the present searching into the future. The meal had been sumptuous, thanks to cook's care. Afterwards we walked along the beach and explored the remains of what had once been a small pier and boat harborage. The pier had been disused for many years and had suffered accordingly. Bill poked around the remains and finally admitted that his previous explanation for the lack of a staircase was faulty, when we found the ruins of a past run of stairs. We both laughed at this and drew closer together.

"Elizabeth, I've no proper right to ask you to be my wife when I've not even established myself, but I love you. Please, don't say a word until I've made my feelings known; it's difficult enough as it is to have to speak my heart. I know we've only just met, but from the moment I saw you I knew I wanted to be with you always, that

your happiness meant more to me than anything else in the world. I can't offer you very much as yet, but if you'll just agree to consider my proposal, I'll move heaven and earth to make you happy. Please don't reject my proposal out of hand. Give me a chance, please!"

I had remained still while he opened his heart to me, but when he finished his impassioned plea, I leaned against him and put my head against his chest. My heart was beating madly with unbridled joy and I could hear the flighty rhythm of his own. Could this be possible? Yes, it was true, he loved me, and the strength of that love gave me the courage to speak. "Bill, I love you!" I was about to say more, but suddenly he bent his head down and kissed me. The kiss silenced my needless words; he loved me and I loved him. What could be simpler than that and what could be more perfect?

As if by some previous arrangement, we disentangled our embrace and continued walking back to the carriage. It was getting late and he knew that I had to pack and prepare for the trip to Albany, although he made it clear that he regretted our having to part, even for a few days. We resumed our places in the carriage and set off. The trip was a relatively rapid one. When we pulled up in front of the house, Bill helped me down and then walked in with me hand in hand. It had been a perfect day. We both knew that we would be married as soon as he could arrange it.

Before we entered the reception alcove, I stopped Bill and spoke in a quiet reserved manner. "Bill, don't mention our intentions to my father, not yet . . . I know you want to, but for my sake, don't . . . please don't."

He looked at me strangely. "Why in heaven's name not? Is there something wrong, something that I don't

know? I think I've a right to know, Beth." His voice made it clear that he was hurt.

How was I to answer Bill without alarming him? Torder's roses had thrown my father into a rage; what then would Bill's request for my hand do? No! I couldn't risk it, not yet, not until I was certain as to what was behind my father's actions. It wouldn't be fair to any of us. "Trust me, Bill. I do love you with all my heart and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but I must ask you to trust me, without questions. Please, Bill, I have my reasons."

He shook his head sadly. "All right, Beth. I will trust you. You leave me no choice. But there's too blamed much mystery around here and I don't like it at all. Still, you can trust me."

It took a tremendous amount of self-control for him to make his promise, but I knew that he would keep it. I loved him even more for that.

The train trip to Albany was a study in silence as Consuelo obviously preferred to leave me to my own thoughts throughout. She didn't appear to be unfriendly towards me, but there was definitely something on her mind with which she was too involved to pay me more than a minimum of attention. I didn't know what was bothering her and she didn't confide in me. She had been this way ever since I returned to the manor, which made me feel that something important had happened while Bill and I were enjoying our picnic. There was a great deal on my own mind and so I paid little attention to her disinterest. I fell asleep.

Chapter Twelve

Consuelo held up a magnificently brocaded silk gown and compared it against my figure to see how it would look on me; she seemed quite excited about her find. I had to admit it was indeed stunning. To her it was *the* gown. Without further ado, she summoned the saleswoman and ordered her to pack it immediately. I wasn't asked for my opinion. That's the way the entire shopping spree had progressed, and I was content to have it so. I honestly didn't know the first thing about the world of high fashion and Consuelo evidently did. However, I couldn't escape the feeling that this was *her trip*, not mine; her manner had made that thought inescapable. From the moment we had arrived at the station, she had set a merry pace through the best shops in Albany and I had been forced to act the part of a clothes dummy rather than a customer. I disliked the sensation intensely, but I was frankly afraid to express my feelings, because I didn't want anything to interfere with the party plans.

Finally, after purchasing several gowns and accessories, she slowed her pace and we relaxed over a cup of tea at a very plush restaurant. She had noticed my displeasure and now took the opportunity to explain her actions.

"Elizabeth, you are angry at me, no?" she asked. "You are insulted that I did not ask you to select the gowns, but I had my reasons. We have little time to shop. We must

take the evening train back to the manor. That surprises you?"

"This evening?" I said, stunned. "I thought we were to stay here several days. Has something happened to change that?"

"Yes, many things have changed. You must be aware that your father is not feeling well. The date of the ball has been moved up by one week, at his suggestion, and so we must hurry along and complete our arrangements. Later we will have time to shop at leisure. Perhaps, we shall go down to New York City to shop in style. You would like that, no?"

"Yes, I would." To shop in the city? The thought of visiting New York City was almost like a fairy tale to me and yet she was suggesting it casually. My father was ill; that was all too true. But why had he advanced the date of the party? It was another in a long chain of mysteries.

"*Bueno!* Then after the tea you will return to the hotel and I shall join you later. I must complete some shopping for the manor and I can see that you're fatigued. The rest will be good for you. There will be many things to do when we return to Haelstrom. I will join you later." She rattled off her plans, which were intended to separate us for some reason of her own, but which fitted my own designs perfectly.

We finished our tea and then parted. I hired a cab and gave the address of Alice Torder. The carriage picked up speed along the tree-lined streets of Albany, and before I even managed to settle down, the driver pulled the team to a halt and informed me that we had arrived. I paid him off and stood before the door of Torder's house, afraid, but determined to learn what I could from Alice. I knocked.

Alice Torder herself answered the door. She stared at me as if she couldn't trust her own eyes, but then brought herself under control and invited me in. She seemed extremely ill at ease, as if she were afraid of me.

"Alice, I haven't much time and there's a great deal that I must ask you." I spoke decisively and allowed her no time to build up a defense. "When I was here the last time, you promised me the answers to certain questions; I want them now and I won't take no for an answer. I want to know why there's so much hatred at Haelstrom Manor. Please, Alice, please don't put me off; I must know!"

She glanced about her fearfully as if expecting a blow. "You should have been told, I told Arthur that, but he shushed me up with that way of his. All right, I'm going to tell you; I don't care what he says." She was defiant and I could see that she had made a decision to help me; it glowed through her anger. "Where do you want me to begin?"

"With my mother." I continued my demanding tone.

She looked at me defeatedly for a moment, then led me to the parlor where she began her strange story, a story woven with jealousies and tragedies from past to present.

My mother, it seems, was the source of the poor relations between Torder and my father. She had been informally engaged to Arthur Torder. When she met my father she jilted him but flaunted their former romance before him. Alice thought that my mother had rid herself of Torder because my father could offer her greater wealth and social position. Her alienation had caused the two former friends to bristle and fight constantly, until at last the situation reached the boiling point and exploded. Alice refused to discuss this, but she intimated

that the two had almost killed each other. Torder had resigned from the army rather then stay with my father, but the danger of a Mexican war brought him back into uniform and under my father's command. A bitter pill for a proud man to swallow.

My father, in the meantime, was having an unhappy time with his wife, who was spending money like water and flirting outrageously with everyone on the post. It was because of this that he requested assignment on the border and once again became Torder's superior officer. The two men were captured and held until my father was able to ransom them by drawing on his family's fortune. Released, they learned of my mother's death and patched up their differences, although the former bond of friendship was shattered. Torder, however, felt indebted to my father, indebted beyond his ability to repay.

At this point in her narrative, Alice paused and asked me if I would like some tea, I said I would and she left the room to arrange for it. I was left with my thoughts. No wonder Torder had been so bitter about my mother! She had thrown him over for my father and then made a farce of her vows. Also explained was my father's rage at seeing Torder's flowers in my room; he must have remembered my mother's affair with Torder. I already knew that he imagined I was her. I was beginning to understand some of the evil forces at work in Haelstrom Manor, but not why my father should want to kill me; that is, not unless he was insane with past grief.

Alice returned with the tea and, as we sat sipping it, continued with her story. After the border incident, my father was assigned to the Embassy in Spain and Torder again left the service so as to mend his fortunes. For sev-

eral years the two men had little or no contact. But then the Spanish-American War broke out and the two were rejoined in the same outfit with the same result—they were captured.

Captured? The word suggested little to me besides some girlish notions I had from reading adventure novels. But Alice described the horror of it, the lack of food or medicines, the constant fear of beatings, and I began to realize that it could indeed drive a man to the point of madness. Had it done that to my father? I listened to her breathlessly as she detailed the events that brought about my father's blindness.

"It's difficult for me to tell you this part of the story," she said worriedly, "but you must know it. It explains much about my brother and his reasons for remaining with your father these several years." She put down her cup and sank back into the upholstery of her chair. "Your father and Arthur were thrown into prison with the other men of their unit, but being officers, were treated with more consideration on the strength of their promise not to attempt to escape. But Arthur couldn't abide being penned in and he broke that parole. The escape was discovered. Arthur was sentenced to death, but your father intervened. Do you understand what I'm telling you? My brother was sentenced to be shot." She paused and stared at me intently. "Yes, I can see that you do. Well, your father told Don Alverez that he had ordered Arthur to attempt the escape and so Arthur couldn't be held responsible for following orders. Don Alverez was furious. He had no choice but to return Arthur to his cell, but your father was thrown into the dungeon in his place. It was that imprisonment that caused your father's blindness and . . . his sickness, poor man."

"His sickness?" I asked suddenly. "What sickness? I know he's practically blind, but what sickness are you referring to? Tell me!"

There was sadness in her deep brown eyes, but also determination. "Elizabeth, I've told you all that I can and perhaps more than I should. You'll have to ask Arthur about that and not me; I swore not to tell anyone. I'm sorry."

I could see that she was firm and so I left off my questioning. She had told me quite a bit. I could now understand the conflict between the two men. Torder felt that he was responsible for my father's condition, yet he blamed him for taking the woman he loved away from him; it was a conflict that divided his loyalty and his very soul. On the other hand, my father had to live with the knowledge that he had stolen my mother from his best friend, as well as with his own blindness. Two men divided yet drawn together by their odd fraternity.

I left Alice and returned to my hotel. Consuelo had not yet returned, which afforded me time to reconsider all that I had learned this afternoon. My close resemblance to my mother had brought back all my father's past unhappiness, I could understand that fully now, and it must have done the same to Torder. But was that unhappiness strong enough to make him want to kill me? It must have been, because I was sure that he was the one who had tried to murder me. It was all terrifyingly clear, all but the question of his illness. How could he be loving one instant and a killer the next? Was my father mad? Was that his illness—insanity?

I was spared further grief by Consuelo's return. She burst into my room with an armload of packages and, after dropping them on my bed, proceeded to unwrap them and display her treasures. They were treasures in-

deed. The first package was a small one, but when I opened the stiff, velvet-lined case, my breath whistled through my teeth involuntarily. I beheld a magnificent emerald necklace set with glowing stones in a cage of glittering gold. I didn't know quite what to say, so I remained mute.

"You like it, no?" she asked with her rising tone.

"It's gorgeous!"

"It's yours," she pronounced. "Your kind father told me to purchase for you the best of everything, and I thought you should have some jewelry of your very own for the ball. Here, try it on; I want to see how it looks on you." She handed me the necklace and waited impatiently while I fumbled with the clasp, then took it out of my hands and put it around her own throat. "It looks wonderful, no? It will go perfectly with your gown, but we waste time." She removed the necklace and replaced it in its case. "We must hurry if we're to make the evening train. Are you packed for the trip?"

"I haven't even unpacked anything as yet," I answered half-amused by her question.

"*Bueno*, then I will have the porter take all this to the station for us." She placed the necklace in her purse and summoned the porter who was waiting outside the door. He loaded the bags and packages on a cart and followed us out of the room to the lobby and finally to a waiting carriage. We were barely in time to make the train.

The trip to the manor was far different from the one to Albany; Consuelo spent a weary time opening and closing the myriad packages and exposing one surprise after another to my enchanted eyes. She had bought furs, stoles, and countless accessories, all of which added up to a not inconsiderable fortune. She must have spent liter-

ally thousands of dollars. Yet she didn't seem to think this at all exorbitant. Obviously, she was used to my father's extreme wealth and paid it little mind. But I could hardly believe that all this was mine. I spent the trip in absolute amazement.

Pedro was waiting for us at the station. After a short conversation with Consuelo in guttural Spanish, he assisted us into the carriage and drove off at a rapid and dizzying pace. I couldn't escape the feeling that he was extremely pleased about something and that that was the reason for his breakneck speed. Consuelo's eyes also betrayed her excitement, as if she were caught up in some intrigue with Pedro. I was filled with apprehension. Whatever had happened in our absence, these two seemed cruelly satisfied. What had happened?

Pedro brought the wildly swaying carriage to a violent stop before the front door of the darkened manor, then hopped down lightly and held the carriage door open for us to descend. He was actually leering at me, undisguisedly, but assumed the role of meek servitor as Counsuelo came abreast. Nevertheless, it was only a role. As we walked to the door, my heart thumped, because I knew that something terrible had taken place for Pedro to be so sickeningly happy.

Even the bright sunshine of the morning didn't penetrate the reception room's heavy draperies. I sensed a disaster here that darkness couldn't account for. I was right! My vision adjusted to the pervading gloom and terror struck me. The room was a shambles. Chairs were overturned, vases were smashed with their pieces scattered, and there were other obvious signs of violence. That violence now seemed to be biding its time, nourishing on suppressed tension. What could have caused this destruction? I'd no way of knowing for certain, but an

inner fear warned me that my father was involved, and possibly the cause. I had to know. So I sought the one person who could tell me—Bill. Where was Bill? Why hadn't he met us when we arrived? Where was he? Where!

Chapter Thirteen

THE MANOR seemed completely deserted. I turned to ask Consuelo what might have happened here, but she had vanished, I was alone. I stood in the center of the destruction, afraid to move, afraid not to. Terror took its toll of my composure, each second adding to its intolerable weight. I couldn't remain here, but the thought of walking through the brooding halls, with their stench of evil, brought horrid images to my mind and froze me to the spot. My eyes darted from side to side, trying to discern some break in the waiting pitch, but the manor remained in deathly silence, waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting.

The silence was intolerable. I broke from its cloying spell and ran out of the manor, to find Bill, to find sanity in this otherwise mad drama. Fear supplied the strength, and I found myself running to Torder's house with tears streaming down my cheeks, blinding me to the path but carrying me onward. At last, I reached his cottage and knocked frantically at the front door. The cottage was alight with candles and so I knew that someone was home, but why didn't they answer?

"Elizabeth, what on earth are you doing here?" Bill stood in the doorway and stared at me queerly as though I were merely a shadow.

"Bill, what's happened? Please, please tell me what's happened?" My questions were punctuated by sobs.

Bill grasped me in his arms and held me close to his heart, rocking me back and forth to soothe my tortured nerves. "You've seen the manor then? Yes, I can see you have. Blast! I would have spared you that, but you returned before I could. There's nothing for that, but come inside and I'll try to tell you what's transpired. Come in, dear, and don't worry; I'm here and you're not alone any more." He released me and drew me into the cottage while he dried my tears with his handkerchief.

I was still in a state of shock, but Bill's reassuring tone quieted me and allowed me to recognize the others who were waiting inside. I saw Bridget and Torder standing before a small, gaily lit fireplace. Bridget raced to my side and held my hand in hers, giving me the first security I'd known since my return. "Thank heaven you're all right, mum. I was worried for you, but I was thinking that you'd not be returning for a few days yet. Ach, it goes to show how much I know about anything." She repeated the information that Bill had given me. But didn't they know that the trip had been shortened? That in itself was strange.

"Bill, the house's a wreck. I saw everything smashed and strewn all over. What caused all this? Please don't hold back the information. Tell me now!"

Bill glanced at the others and then led me to a small sofa and seated me. His face was grim, although he tried to hide his feelings from me. He told me what had happened in a soft and gentle tone.

Soon after Consuelo and I had left for the station, Pedro returned to the manor and immediately sought out my father. Bill surmised that Pedro had been spying on us while we were at the beach and observed Bill kissing

me. Within minutes after Pedro's conference with him, my father stormed out of his room, dragging Pedro by the neck, throwing him down the stairs and screaming imprecations in gutter Spanish. Pedro had run from the manor as if possessed and my father returned to his room. Bill had wanted to go to him, but remembered his promise to me and held back from provoking a situation in which he would have to discuss our future plans. Consequently, he had remained downstairs and waited for my father to calm down.

Bill patted my hand gently. He clearly was looking for some method to continue without alarming me, but I used his silence to intrude a question of my own. "Bill, how could Pedro have seen us? He wasn't on the beach when we arrived and I don't recall seeing him on the way back. Where could he have come from? It doesn't make sense."

Bill considered this then shook his head. "I don't know. As a matter of fact, I didn't even think about that, but it's something I'll look into after this all blows over." I could tell that I had aroused his curiosity. He made a mental note of my question and continued his narrative.

A few hours later Bill began to hope that the violent mood that possessed my father had passed, but his hopes were dashed when my father appeared at the head of the staircase and began screaming for Bill to face him. There was no avoiding a confrontation and so Bill started up the staircase—started up, but never made it to the top, because seeing him, my father practically raced down the flight to berate him.

Bill's face portrayed the torment that he was again undergoing and, for the instant, I thought he might become physically ill. However, the moment passed and he continued.

"I don't know what got into your father, Beth, but I couldn't reason with him at all. It got out of hand a bit. I suppose it was bound to under the circumstances."

"Under what circumstances?" I interrupted.

"Your father isn't responsible for his actions!"

"Bill, are you saying that my father's insane?"

"Insane? No!" Bill held my hand tightly and stared at me. "Beth, your father's condition is similar to that of a man who overindulges in alcohol. I don't mean to suggest that he's a drunkard . . . he's not. Oh Beth, how can I explain this to you without muddying everything up?" He looked confused and terribly upset. "Perhaps, yes . . . I'll start at the beginning. I've been speaking to Torder about this and he's told me the details that were missing before. Your father, Beth, was thrown into a punishment cell and tortured by his captors, which caused him incredible pain. To sustain his life he was given opiates. Opiates kill pain, but can become a death in themselves when overused—they become more important than life. It's not a pretty picture I'm painting, but it's best that you understand what's involved. Your father's use of these drugs at certain times must affect him in a savage manner."

That explained it, then: how my father could be loving one moment and violent the next. The drugs brought a change that made him attempt murder; that had to be the answer. I was about to tell Bill what had happened my first night at Haelstrom Manor, but I didn't want to with Torder and Bridget standing by; it could wait till later when we were alone. There was still something bothering me about the recent fight and I turned to Bill for an explanation. "Bill, you said my father became enraged shortly after I left for Albany, but why then is

the house still such a mess? You said you didn't have time to arrange things, but that was two days ago."

"I'm afraid I'm responsible for that state of affairs," said Torder, stepping forward. "Bill had nothing to do with the destruction that ensued. You see, the fight happened a few hours ago and it was between your father and myself. I find it difficult to explain the background, but—"

"I know the background, Mr. Torder. I spoke to Alice yesterday while I was in Albany. You weren't there to lock me in my room and I was quite overbearing with her; she had no choice but to tell me the truth." My statement rocked him back for a second, but he recovered quickly.

"I see," he said reservedly. "I suppose it's best that you do know, but, for the record, it wasn't I that locked you in the room . . . it was Miguel and he did it on his own. Force of habit, I imagine. He used to be a jailer, the one that helped me with my escape. Unfortunately his brother was a different breed. His brother is Pedro." His face reflected his disgust.

"Frankly, after hearing what Dr. Talbot here had to say about your father's actions, I went to the manor and tried to reason with him, but only succeeded in enraging him. We'd fought before, but this time it wasn't really a fight, it was a display. Your father went around the house smashing everything he could get his hands on, but he completely ignored me. At no time did he offer me any violence—that's not his way. That's about it, except to say that he frightened the devil out of Bridget and she joined us here a few moments ago."

"Is my father all right now?" I asked concernedly.

"Yes, he should be sleeping off the effects now," said Bill gently. "I doubt that he'll even remember the whole

incident when he awakens. Don't be too hard on him, Elizabeth; he can't help what he's become and he's going to need all the love and affection that you can give him if he's to survive as a man. He's caused no real harm. From what Torder says, he's quire incapable of doing so. Everything will be all right, believe me."

"I do believe you, Bill," I said as I held onto him and leaned my head against his chest. "What am I going to do now?"

"I think it would be best if Bridget and you returned to the manor and acted as if nothing had happened. Heaven knows that he's going to need understanding. It would be a godsend if you were there to give it to him. He needs you, Beth, and that's what's vital." His voice was tenderly loving.

I leaned close to him and whispered low. "Bill, there's something that I have to tell you . . . I don't want to mention it in front of the others, but it's very important."

He smiled down at me for their benefit, but I could detect his concern. "Not here . . . not now . . . I've got to leave for town, but I'll meet you this evening and we can talk."

"This evening? Aren't you coming back to the manor with me? Please, Bill, I don't want to go back there alone." I tried to sound calm, but my trembling voice betrayed me.

He gave my hand a tender squeeze. "It'd be foolish for me to provoke your father right now. Besides, there's something essential that I must do. Bridget will be with you. I'll send a message by way of her young man when we can be alone. It won't be very long. It's very important that I go to town. I'll see you tonight, my dearest."

I had no way of knowing what was drawing Bill to town, but his every action told me that he had to go and

so I reluctantly agreed; Bridget and I returned to the manor.

Three hours had passed since my return to my room, three hours of waiting for some sign of life in the otherwise silent atmosphere. Not a sound was to be heard anywhere in the halls and I did not feel adventurous enough to seek it out. My father was probably sleeping. But where were Consuelo and Pedro? It wasn't like my stepmother to remain in the background and that added to my apprehension. I recalled her twisted smile on arrival. No wonder she had been pleased at Pedro's secret; anything that would hurt Torder's place in this household would undoubtedly bring her pleasure. But why wasn't she taking advantage of this windfall? Why was she hiding?

The period of waiting came to an abrupt end when Consuelo knocked on my door and entered without waiting for my permission. She was in a state of high excitement and seemed surprised that I had not yet sought her out for an explanation. However, she skipped over the incident and began to discuss plans for the coming party. I'd not realized the vast amount of details that were required for a successful ball until she drew me into a discussion as to which I wanted and thought appropriate. I was both surprised and pleased by her change in attitude. Within a short time, my opinions of her had changed radically—she was now my friend, or at least, I hoped she was; I didn't really know.

Her usual intensity appeared subdued in some mysterious way, which allowed me to relax and grow interested in what she was saying.

"Elizabeth, we have a fantastic amount of things to do for the ball. We waste time by chattering like this. If

you are not too fatigued, perhaps we can start. The dressmaker from town is waiting in my room. Shall we begin with altering your gown so that it will be ready in time?" Her impatient manner indicated she wouldn't take no for an answer.

Before the dressmaker was through with her stitching and Consuelo satisfied as to the result, the morning and most of the afternoon had passed. In a way, I was thankful for this, because it allowed me no time to brood about the strange and terrifying incidents that had occurred. But Consuelo's pace was rapidly exhausting my reserve of energy. She was not at all tired. We continued making arrangements for guests and outlining the many things that had yet to be done, until I'd reached my limit and told Consuelo that I would have to rest. This brought an air of consideration to her voice. She told me to rest by all means. I left her and returned to my room to find Bridget waiting for me, in tears.

She tried ineffectually to stem the tide, but her sobs tore at my heart. I went over to her and hugged her. Slowly her weeping ebbed and she turned to me with shock and sorrow written over her broad trusting face.

"Mum, it's terrible!" she sobbed.

"What's happened, Bridget?"

"We've all been given our notice—we've been fired." As she spoke, her sobs increased and her body jerked with their implacable rhythm; it was too much for her to contain. For Bridget, getting fired was the end of everything.

"That's nonsense," I exclaimed. "Now calm down and tell me who's been fired and by whose orders?"

"Everyone's been given notice: cook, myself, Sean and even the old man, his father. We're all to be turned out right after your party, that's the word we've been given. It's terribly cruel it is, what with cook being here

so long and the others having nowheres to go. What did we do?" Her question was directed towards herself.

I couldn't understand any of this. Why should they all have been given notice? "Bridget, take hold of yourself and tell me who gave the orders. How can I help you if I don't know whom to ask? . . . Was it my father?"

She nodded in the affirmative and searched my face. She desperately needed me. I was determined to help her no matter what the cost; she was my friend!

"Bridget, listen to me. You're not going to be fired. Not one of you will be forced to leave, not if I can help it, and I assure you that I can. If you leave, then so do I; that's my solemn promise." I took her hand and patted it while I soothed her with my promises. "I'll speak to my father tonight and get this whole mess straightened out; don't worry, you'll always have a place with me and that goes for cook and the rest. Now you tell the others to leave this to me and stop worrying."

She gazed at me with devotion. "Oh, thank you, Miss Elizabeth . . . you're the finest friend I've ever had . . . thank you." Her smile was glorious.

Bridget left the room with new hope in her stride. If only I felt as secure as she did! What possible reason could my father have for firing a staff that was loyal to him in every way? Another question, another link in a chain of mystery that bound me to despair.

The fatigue that had been building within me now forced me to lie down. My eyes were incredibly heavy. Though I struggled to retain my control, I plunged into the deep black well of sleep.

Drums were beating in my head. I tried to block out the incessant throbbing without success. What did the hollow booming drums signify? Drums? They weren't drums

at all; they were rather the sounds of someone knocking on my door, knocking with determination. I was still groggy as I called for the person to enter, but awoke completely when Bridget entered wheeling a large cart upon which were stacked several casserole dishes. She was smiling from ear to ear, her jaunty look infinitely better than the sad aspect she had held before.

"What's all this?" I said, indicating the cart.

"It's your dinner, mum," she answered. Seeing my confusion, she explained. "You must have been dreadfully tired. You've slept through dinner and then some. It's eight o'clock. I didn't wake you because you seemed to need the rest, but cook wouldn't let you starve; she's prepared a special meal for you that I hope you'll like." She opened the bottom compartment in the cart and brought out a generous serving of freshly roasted fowl as well as side dishes of sweet potatoes, fresh beans, and honeyed buns. A meal for a king, as Bill would say. I suddenly felt ravenously hungry and, with Bridget serving me, devoured the tasty repast with genuine pleasure. The cook had certainly outdone herself and the reason was known to me—she was grateful for my promise of aid.

"Bridget, what about the others—my father and stepmother, and Bill? Has he returned yet?"

"Dr. Talbot isn't back yet and your father is still in his room, but as for the *dark one*, she's already eaten and disappeared again." Still the sound of hate in her voice as she mentioned Consuelo.

I didn't want to start an argument, but I felt it necessary to heal the ill will between Bridget and my stepmother so that there could finally be peace in this household. "Bridget, I want you to be completely truthful with me and with yourself as well. It's easy to tell that you don't

like my stepmother, but why? What has she ever done to you that you should hate her so much? Isn't it foolish to hold a grudge so long? Be honest."

Bridget stared at me intensely for a few moments. Would she remain angrily silent? Finally, she decided in my favor and began to speak about incidents and feelings that formed the basis for the enmity. The long, involved tale was fraught with emotional outbursts that staggered the imagination, but what I thought it all boiled down to was misunderstanding and superstition. Bridget summed it up in her own candid way.

"I've not the fine education of you, but I've got a feeling about that one and I know whereof I speak. That one's got no soul and no care for anyone but herself. Mark my words, Miss Elizabeth, she's up to no good and that I know for sure."

"What do you know for sure?" I probed.

"For one thing, if your father is taking drugs, then it's the *dark one* that's giving them to him. I've seen her putting the cursed stuff in his coffee when she brings it to him at night; she's secretive about it, but I've seen her nevertheless. What do you think of that?" She stuck her chin out, daring me to make light of her knowldge.

"*He certainly should know better than to take an overdose. What was he trying to do, kill himself?*" Dr. Blodget's words returned to met with the force of a blow and I recoiled from the true meaning of those words. Was he trying to kill himself, or was she trying to kill him? There was the question. Bridget's insinuation drowned me in absolute confusion. It was Bridget's imagination . . . it had to be . . . Consuelo loved my father, she had sacrificed her father's life to save him, he had told me so himself. NO! Bridget was mistaken. She had to be!

"I don't know what to think about it, Bridget," I an-

swered. "I wish I had all the answers, believe me, but I do know that you've something entirely different on your mind. You're certainly not wearing that beautiful dress just to serve me dinner, are you? Have you an appointment with Sean?" She had on a blouse of pure white linen and a wide flaring skirt, which swept the floor with its embroidered hem; no doubt, it was her finest and it wasn't meant for my eyes alone.

For an instant, she was dumbfounded. Then she laughed liltingly and threw her head back. "You've sharp eyes, you have. Yes, I'm to meet him at *our* spot in a while, the one by the cliff, but there's no knowing when he'll show up." She smiled at me engagingly and then let her gaze wander to my velvet cloak hanging in the closet. "Would it be asking too much if I asked the loan of that gorgeous cloak for the evening? It's my birthday and I'd like to look me best for Sean, although he's not likely to notice, that one." Her voice held a mixture of doubt and desire.

"Certainly, you can use it whenever you've a mind to." I walked to the closet and took out the cloak. "Here you are, and happy birthday to you. Have a good time." She put the cloak on and spun around in front of the mirror, which brought a gush of happiness to her voice. "Oh it's a fine garment, but do you think it looks well on me —I mean, for the likes of me?"

"It looks perfect on you. Why, with the hood in place, you look exactly like me when I wear it; you'd never tell us apart. You look very nice. Don't fret about that." I wasn't being immodest, only trying to say the one thing that would make her feel best. I succeeded.

Bridget flashed me another smile and then excused herself. She opened the door quietly and stole out into the hall, closing the door behind her. Her departure

brought back a feeling of wretched loneliness. The walls seemed to close in on me. I tried to busy my mind with the thought of seeing Bill that night. He had said that he would send word with Sean, so perhaps when Bridget returned she would have word for me. I hoped so with every breath, because there was a great deal that I had to tell him and Bridget's grudging information intensified my unrest.

Was my father truly trying to kill me? The evidence was too strong to disregard. Now, I had a double burden to bear and its weight was unbelievably oppressing. Bridget had to be wrong! What possible reason could Consuelo have for wanting to drug my father? Surely she was just following his orders; that would account for what Bridget had seen and misunderstood. But why had she tried to silence Dr. Blodget? Was she ashamed of my father's condition? Yes, that was it.

Haelstrom Manor, my home, was a nest of unanswered questions, a nest of evil suspicions. Indeed, I couldn't escape the sensation that Haelstrom Manor was built to contain terror, not to defend against it, and that feeling suddenly grew to alarming proportions. Death was stalking this place, searching for its prey, and the rustle of its wings could be heard outside my window.

If Bridget were here, she would laugh at my premonition, or would she? Perhaps not; she'd said she also felt the malignant evil that dwelt here. If only she were present, I would be able to laugh it all off as a product of my imagination, but she wasn't; she was on her way to see Sean. The thought of her rendezvous with Sean lightened my mood. I knew she would find happiness in his arms, just as I had found with Bill. Love brought more than happiness; it brought the joy of heaven to earth. By

now, she would be just about at the shrub which disguised the opening to *her* spot and I decided to try to see her from my window.

I strode to it and threw open the heavy pane. Yes, I could see her as she approached the wall with hurried steps, but her shadow, cast by the pale moonlight, seemed to hang back, then grow in size and swell with another hidden shape. Bridget had disappeared into the brush, but her shadow remained in view for an instant and I knew that death was indeed hovering near. I wanted to cry out to her to beware, but the wind would not allow my voice to be heard and so I watched in deadly fascination as the dark shape flowed along the ground, hunting the path to the cliff.

The moon broke from the clouds and revealed the black predatory form of someone crouching low, moving with stealthy design towards the bush. But more . . . the moon's pale glow was entrapped within a small diamond broach that spewed forth radiant sparks along its facets, a broach that belonged to my stepmother . . . *CONSUELO!*

It was Consuelo. She was dressed in her usual mode of black, but her diamond circlet betrayed her identity. I knew instinctively that she intended to push the cloaked figure over the cliff. I could do nothing but watch and wait in morbid fascination as she moved to complete her deadly plan. Suddenly the air was sundered by a scream of utter despair and soul-enveloping fear, a scream that faded in volume as Bridget's body plummeted down the cliff to the rocks below, a scream that tore through my heart and shattered my last hopes of peace.

I ran from my room and raced down the winding staircase to the hall below, heedless of the need for cau-

tion, and then out into the chill night air. The moon's silvery light was sufficient to guide me along the twisted path and I reached the bush that covered the concealed hole in the wall scarcely minutes after Bridget's final scream. I was totally oblivious to the thorns that ripped through my delicate dress as I made my way out on to the cliff and searched for some sign of what had befallen my friend. I knew what I would find, even before I conquered my fear and looked out over the cliff. But what I beheld, on the cruel rocks below, was too much to bear. Bridget's broken form lay between the granite teeth, and her blood stained the shimmering jaws which held her fast. I tried to avert my gaze as the dizzying sickness rose within me, but the horror could not be denied. Bridget was dead! Murdered! Murdered by Consuelo! Consuelo! Her vile name slammed into my mind with the repetitive hammers of hatred and froze my heart.

I stared unrelievedly at the shattered corpse below me, until suddenly I noticed another shape taking form on the beach below. It was Consuelo. But it couldn't be! She had pushed Bridget to her death from this very spot; she couldn't be there on the beach! But she was. Consuelo moved towards the body with slow and steady steps through the oncoming surf. It was impossible! How could she have pushed Bridget and then reached the beach in about the same time as I reached the cliff? It would have taken her at least half an hour by the quickest route. Was I losing my mind? Was I too being driven insane?

Consuelo reached Bridget's body and turned her over so that the bloody face was uncovered to the moonlight. She bent over for a closer look and then shrieked angrily in the night's eerie blackness with the abandon of a wolf. She moved away from the body and as she turned the

moon once again caught the fire of her broach, the same fire which had earlier betrayed her. It was and had been Consuelo . . . incredible, but sickeningly true. *Consuelo was the murderess!* I screamed once and then fainted.

Chapter Fourteen

"I think she would defend you to the death . . . to the death . . . to the death." "Mark my words, she's up to no good . . . up to no good . . . mark my words." "It's not his way . . . not his way . . . not his way."

Voices, words, useless empty phrases, kept swirling in my mind, defying me to lock them out, daring me to try. What did it all mean? *Was I mad?* Had Haelstrom Manor driven us all mad with its evil? My father a killer? Consuelo a murderess? I had seen her, but she couldn't have reached the beach if she had truly thrown Bridget to her death. What was the answer? What was the question?

I opened my eyes suddenly. Where was I? My mind refused to sweep away the haze that was enshrouding me. Gradually I realized that I was once again back in my room, and my father was standing over me. With an instantaneous explosion, the events of the past few moments struck me and made me recoil in horror. Bridget was dead. My friend had been murdered, but by whom and why? Why was my father standing over me without speaking? Why didn't he say something?

"Thank God you're all right. When I heard your scream, I thought that something had happened to you. Thank God that you're all right." My father dully and vacantly kept repeating his last sentence as he bent over

me. There were tears in his eyes, though he hardly seemed to notice them as he patted my hand tenderly. Most strangely, he seemed to be hypnotized by his own mutterings—unaware that I had regained consciousness.

"Father, what happened? Is she dead?" The questions tore from my throat with the force of desperation. His body jerked suddenly as he realized that I was awake; then he looked down at me and nodded slowly.

"Yes, she's dead," he said sadly. "It was a terrible accident, a terrible way for her to die." His tears kept flowing.

"It wasn't an accident," I shouted. "She was murdered; I saw the whole thing. Someone pushed her from the cliff." Terror had given way to a desire for vengeance as I spoke and my father shied back from my overt hatred. "She was murdered, do you hear me, murdered!"

"Yes, Beth, I hear you," he answered, "but that makes no sense at all. Who would want to kill her? She was such a gentle thing. No, you must have made a mistake in the confusion. Yes, that's it, you must have imagined it." His tone made it clear that he couldn't accept my charge.

"I don't know who killed her. I thought I did, but I do know that she was murdered. For the love of heaven, father, believe me, she was pushed." Even as I spoke, I could see that he had closed his mind. I couldn't allow him to shrug off the truth. "Consuelo killed her!"

"You must have lost your senses," he hissed angrily. "It was Consuelo who discovered the body. Are you trying to tell me that she flew down the face of the cliff and alighted on the beach seconds after she supposedly pushed Bridget?" He looked at me with disgust transfiguring his face. "I didn't expect this of you, my own daughter, but I see that I was mistaken. You're like the rest of them." He stood back and glared at me for a min-

ute, then turned on his heel and left the room, slamming the heavy door behind him.

He was right, he had to be. I had allowed my suspicions to become facts in my tortured mind. I'd angered my father when I had no right. Now I was left alone with my thoughts in the silent darkness of Haelstrom Manor. What was I to do? I couldn't remain here all alone. I rose from my bed and had walked unsteadily halfway to the door when it swung open on its hinges and Bill stood revealed in the breach. He looked at me, then cradled me in his arms as I rushed to him. Bill was here, with me . . . thank heaven.

"Oh Bill, it was horrible. I wanted to warn her and I couldn't; now she's dead."

"It's all right, my dearest; everything will be all right." He held me against him and stroked my hair with a gentle soothing rhythm. "That's right, dear, cry out your fear and heartache. I understand. It's over now. She wouldn't want you to cry." He held my chin and lifted my face towards him. "Now, try to calm down and tell me what you saw from the window."

The reassurance of his presence gave me the strength to tell him everything I had seen; everything that had happened from the day I arrived at the manor. He listened patiently, occasionally asking a question to clarify some point. Gradually I felt the security of his love suffuse my soul with tender adoration and wash away the terror of the night. Once I had started, the incidents poured from my lips, but each frightening remembrance now seemed to lack the power to hurt me—such was the immense shield of his love. I finished my tale of fearsome doubts and waited for him to nullify them with his words.

"If I'd known what you were suffering, I would have

taken you away from here, by force if necessary. But I won't now, because I know that all these questions would haunt you the rest of your life. I don't think you'll ever find peace without answers and so I'm going to find them for both our sakes. You've been a very brave girl, Beth. If you'll agree, I'm going to draw on that courage and ask you to stay here at Haelstrom Manor. Will you stay, Beth, knowing the danger? God knows I don't want you to, but I think you must." He looked deeply into my eyes as he spoke, his voice softly pleading.

"I'll stay," I answered simply.

He held me away from him slightly, then bent and kissed me on the forehead. "That's my girl. Now, I've got a surprise for you that I'm sure you'll welcome." He saw the question in my eyes and laughed merrily. "I don't know how you can abide her, she chatters incessantly, but I doubt if she has a mean bone in her body. It's your friend, Susan. She's just arrived and I had the devil of a time in keeping her from breaking down your door." He grew serious. "Beth, I want you two to remain together at all times—I don't want you out of her sight for even a moment. Will you promise me that?"

"Of course, darling; don't you worry. Besides, if I know Susan, I shan't be able to separate from her for a heartbeat. I'll be safe . . . please don't burden yourself on my account." My promise seemed to mollify his fears and the smile returned to his face. He kissed me again, then strode to the door with purposeful strides and opened it.

"Why, Elizabeth Halsley, you should be ashamed of yourself. All this time and you haven't written a word; you might at least have told me of your friend, Dr. Talbot, and that you were coming to live here at Haelstrom . . . I mean it's not fair and I won't leave this room until

you've told me everything that's happened from the moment you left school." Her words were blown forth like a chain of bursting bubbles, each chasing the other with fluid speed. "And you missed the commencement dance, but never mind, I'll tell you all about it, and then there's the news about Margret and her fiancé. Did you know she's . . ." She rattled on without let-up.

As Susan was gushing forth, I noticed Bill tiptoe out and close the door behind him. Somehow, with Susan in the room, I felt safe. I decided to ask her to share my bed with me so that I would sleep without fear. She thought the idea "simply marvel—just like we used to at school." She resumed her gossip and before we realized it, it was midnight and time for bed. We both crawled under the covers and within a few minutes were fast asleep.

The morning dawned bright and beautiful. Susan, with the sleep of the just, awoke with all the energy of the previous night still unspent and demanding an outlet. I dreaded to go down to the dining room, dreaded meeting Consuelo across the table, but there was no restraining Susan. So, arm in arm, we bounded down to the table. Consuelo was nowhere to be seen, for which I thanked my stars, but Bill was waiting for us as was cook. The three of us ate breakfast, while cook hovered over us like a mother hen with her brood of chicks. By tacit agreement, the tragedy of the previous night was unmentioned. Even cook seemed to have put it out of her mind.

After the meal, the three of us sat around and talked about inconsequentials until Bill stood up and announced that he had some minor errands and would see us both later in the evening. I was disappointed to have him go, but Susan welcomed his exit as it gave her the chance to gossip about how wonderful and handsome he was. She was delighted that he and I were in love. To her, this was

the perfect fairy tale come true. She told me just why we were ideally mated and questioned me as to every detail of our courtship. This was the Susan I had known and loved at school. Her buoyant personality lifted my spirits.

The meeting with Consuelo was not nearly as traumatic as I had imagined, due in no small part to Susan's presence. To my complete surprise Consuelo acted as if nothing had happened, as if she were not aware of my accusations. I felt my obstinate suspicions dissolving beneath her gracious manner as she outlined the day's tasks. There was still a tremendous amount of work to do before the party and it seemed that I was to be involved in nearly all of it. I listened to her efficient planning with amazement. In spite of Bridget's death, her voice and manner gave no hint of concern or remorse. Surely, if she had murdered Bridget, there would be some clue in her behavior, but there was absolutely none. Another brick of suspicion broke from my wall of certainty.

Consuelo took the two of us in tow and before we fully realized it, we were up to our necks in work, planning the seating arrangements, deciding upon the music to be played, selecting the proper menu, and instructing the large horde of domestics from the town as to what their duties were to be. Then we went upstairs to finish fitting my gown. Susan thought it was the most magnificent gown she had ever seen and her statement to that effect pleased Consuelo immensely. It was as if I were living a dream of happy, carefree splendor and I brightened to meet it. From early morning, the day had been perfect and promised to continue the same way.

I was so involved in the preparations, that when Consuelo mentioned that we should have to hurry and dress for dinner, I had to check the wall clock to believe

her, which made her smile and Susan giggle. It seemed unbelievable that the day had flown past so quickly. Susan's pleasant chatter had kept me laughing and amused the whole day, never once mentioning the tragic accident, although I knew she must be bursting to learn the details. How difficult it must have been for her to contain herself and how wonderful of her to help me forget. For an instant, I felt sorrow return, but she noticed it immediately and dragged me off to our room to prepare for dinner, a dinner at which my father would be present.

Dinner that evening was a preview to the next night's affair. The polished teak table was laid out with the finest linens and silver, each piece gleaming. At the head sat my father, formally dressed and looking every inch a fine gentleman. It made me proud to see him like this and that note garnished my words as I introduced him to Susan. She reacted as I knew she would, putting on her best manners and showing him the respect he was due.

As soon as we were all seated, Susan and I bracketing my father and Bill by my side, my father rang a small silver bell and cook brought out the appetizers. One course followed the other with delicious regularity, but I couldn't help noticing that my father was becoming extremely ill at ease. As the conversation swelled around him, he seemed to withdraw from us all, first nodding politely, then actually wincing when he was asked his opinion. Finally, he excused himself from the table, saying that he wasn't feeling very well and not to concern ourselves on his behalf. He mumbled his regrets, his speech almost inaudible, and left the room with unpardonable alacrity. Something was bothering him. I realized that he wasn't used to our constant chattering, and it had probably driven him from our company. It

was no one's fault, but I felt responsible for his discomfort, so also excused myself and, motioning for Susan to remain seated, hurried out of the room to catch up with my father. I found him in the library, seated behind a large desk, his head bowed to his chest, crying softly. I didn't want to intrude on him without warning and so I coughed once or twice to give him the opportunity to collect himself.

"Father, about last night, I'm sorry that I angered you by my ridiculous accusations, but I—"

"I understand, child. It was a hideous thing to watch and a person's imagination will often play tricks. You thought you saw someone out there and for some reason your nightmare took the shape of Consuelo. I know you didn't mean what you said and I'm sure you realize your mistake." His gaze was tender and loving as he came towards me and put his hands on my shoulders. "Elizabeth, I've treated you brutishly since you arrived. I do want you to know that I love you, more than I was prepared to admit until last night when I heard that despairing scream and thought that you had fallen over the cliff. I almost died then. Believe me, my dearest, if it had been you, I would have. It must sound hypocritical to you, but as I pray for heaven, it's the truth. Please, Beth, please believe me."

I'd often heard it said that the eyes are the mirror of the soul, and as I gazed into my father's, I knew that the saying was true. His eyes, wells of compassion and love, admitted no bottom. "I do believe you father; I do believe you with all my heart and soul."

"Yes, I can see that, but I wonder if you know how much it means to me to hear you say it? I don't know what happened last night, but I do know that this house is partly responsible for the evil that stalks it. Haelstrom

Manor isn't a home; it's an unholy snare, built in defiance, burned in vengeance, and rebuilt in arrogant pride, but it won't have the chance to compound its poison much longer." The mention of the manor's past history transformed my father's face into a mask of suppressed bitterness. "Beth, when the party is over, we're going to leave this accursed spot to the crows and move to a country estate where there's greenery and flowers, gently rolling hills, and the contentment that clean, sunlit gardens bring. You'll like that, I know, and that's important to me now, because I haven't much time left to enjoy it." He held me tightly. "Don't be shocked, child. I've known for some time that I was dying, but the doctor's have finally confirmed it. At best, I've another year. It will be a year of true happiness for me, because it'll be graced by your love and that's far more than many men have. Don't cry, Beth. I'm not afraid of death, not now. Before the year is up, I'll have spent an eternity in heaven with you, an eternity measured not in days and weeks, but in the happiness that I shall try to bring you." He relaxed his grip on my shoulders, but held me close. "A year is a long time, Beth. Before I go, I'll have had the double pleasure of seeing you married to Dr. Talbot and beginning a life of your own with the man you love. Don't be surprised, my little one. I know love when I see it and he loves you as much as you love him. You have my blessing, Elizabeth, though I dare say it wouldn't deter you if you didn't . . . that's the way it should be. When you know something is right, don't ever compromise, never, because you sacrifice your soul when you do. I've been terribly long-winded and I can see that you want to say something."

"Oh daddy, it's not fair. We've only just met each other and now you say we'll have to part within a year. I want

you to live!" Salty tears streamed down my cheeks unheeded.

"We'll have the year, Beth, and it'll be a full and wonderful year; I promise you." He paused and wiped the tears from my eyes. "Now, wouldn't you like to leave this hellish mound of stone? Of course you would, and we will, right after your grand debutante ball. Things will be so much better once we're away from here—you'll see."

My father's speech renewed my hope and faith in the future, and I glowed with inner happiness. Seeing my joy, he continued telling me his plans and explaining the way they could be accomplished. Sunlight wouldn't injure his eyes, he said, because the eye specialist had constructed spectacles of smoked glass, which would eliminate the glare and permit him to go outside for a few hours a day. The other problems were as easily solved. He had purchased the other estate years ago, though he had seldom visited it, and he thought there would be little difficulty in convincing cook, Sean, and the old man to move.

At that point I told him what Bridget had said about everyone being given notice. His reaction was startling. He seemed to age right before my eyes as he disclaimed any knowledge of having said that; as he remembered it, he had told her that we were all moving to the new house, but perhaps she had misunderstood him. I could tell that he was terribly confused and that he was beginning to doubt his memory. I couldn't stand to see him degrade himself and so I claimed that it was I who had made the error; this seemed to relieve him and his smile returned. He hugged me close and then released me.

"Beth, I'll have to ask a favor of you. I think it would be best if you didn't mention this conversation to Con-

suelo. I know that you mistrust her—perhaps it's because she's not like most women—but love and loyalty are worth more than social graces. Remember, she sacrificed her father's life to save mine and our futures are bound together. It's not the proper time to tell her what the doctors have decreed, so please let's make this our private bond." His plea was burdened with more than he was telling me, but I agreed without question and this pleased him.

He bent over and brushed back an errant hair from in front of my eye, then, in a gentle voice, bade me goodnight and advised me to go right to bed so that I would be rested when the guests arrived. I said I would and turned to open the door, but his question stopped me in my tracks.

"Beth, what made you imagine it was Consuelo?" His tone bordered on desperation, although he was attempting to hide it.

"Her diamond circlet," I answered tonelessly. "I thought I saw the moonlight reflect off her brooch."

"Her diamond brooch? Strange." His eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown. "Well, as I said before, goodnight, child, and sleep well."

"Goodnight, father. It will be a wonderful year." I felt the reflection of his love as I left the library. One thing was now certainly resolved: whoever my assailant had been, it had not been my father. Torder had said that my father was incapable of violence and my heart told me that he was right; beneath his hardened shield was a man of compassion, not an assassin nor a madman. My father was a gentleman who only wanted a year of peace.

Impulsively, I turned back to the library to give him a goodnight kiss. As I turned, I became aware of someone hiding behind the corner, next to the library door,

and I sensed that the hidden figure had been listening to every word that had been spoken. I started to return to the library to warn my father, but as I approached, the eavesdropper moved further back into the shadows, then fled along the darkened hall. I stopped where I was, Bill's warning suddenly returning to me, and watched the twisted shadow disappear into the gloom. I didn't need to investigate further. I had recognized the malformed shape—it was Pedro!

Unquenchable fear once again rose to dismay me and I practically ran back to the dining room to escape from the spectre. For a second, I thought the room empty, but then I saw Susan sitting in a deep easy chair which hid her from view. I went over and was about to ask her where everyone had gone, when she volunteered the information in a breathless monologue. She told me that Consuelo had left the room soon after I did, and then a few minutes later, a Mr. Torder had entered and held a rapid conversation with Bill. She thought they had mentioned something about the stones in the wall being out of place, but they were speaking too rapidly for her to be sure. However, Bill had quickly scrawled a note for me, which he asked Susan to give me when I returned. She handed it to me.

My dearest darling,

Please forgive me for rushing off this way, but Torder has just brought me some information that may help solve the mystery of Haelstrom Manor: we are leaving now to investigate and we'll be gone until tomorrow evening. I'm dreadfully sorry about having to leave you, but for the sake of our future peace of mind, I must. Please, my darling, do not under any circumstances go off on your own. Stay with Susan at all times! When I return, I

should have the answer to everything that's been frightening you. Stay with Susan, darling, and I'll see you tomorrow evening at your party.

I love you, my darling, love you and need you.

Forever, Bill

I read and reread the letter until I had practically memorized its contents, but it did little to curb my rampant anxiety. What were Torder and Bill going to investigate and what was the meaning of their conversation about the stones in the wall? It all sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on its significance. I only knew that he thought there was danger abroad. Why else would he have insisted twice that I not leave Susan, even for an instant? I could feel danger with every breath. There was death wallowing in this darkness, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Susan quickly appraised the situation and took me by the hand as if I were some naughty schoolchild shirking lessons. She absolutely refused to allow me to remain downstairs and dragged me up to our room, where she insisted that I get under the covers. Resistance was futile. Within a quarter of an hour after putting my head on the down pillow, I was fast asleep.

Chapter Fifteen

"Oh I've never seen anyone look so beautiful," said Susan as she twirled my hand about, forcing me to pirouette before her gaze. "Cinderella couldn't have looked nearly as fine as you do, Beth. You're the picture of loveliness."

"Susan, you're still an incurable romantic, but thank you anyway." I tried to tone down her effervescent praises, but it was no use; Susan was completely enthralled by dreams of Prince Charming riding on a white charger, and there was no altering her fantasies. At her command, I waltzed around again. It had been like this from early morning. First she fixed my hair, then did it again, then again, until finally I called a halt to her efforts to save us both from collapse. It was impossible to placate her. Throughout the day she had carried me on the crest of her excitement.

The afternoon was gone and in a few moments I would leave the room and be presented by my father to all the guests, who had been arriving in droves. Many were extremely powerful and influential men, senators and judges even, or so Susan informed me, and they were all waiting at the head of the staircase for me to make my appearance. I was to walk halfway down the stairs, where I would be met by my father and introduced; this was the formula for a debutante's first introduction to polite

society. The thought frightened the life out of me. If only they would accept me as one of their own! I wanted so much for my father to be proud of me; their acceptance would give him the precious gift of respect which he needed so desperately.

It was getting late. I could hear the orchestra beginning to tune up. My stomach began to buzz like a hive of bees as I waited for the waltz which would signal my entrance. I wanted to run and hide somewhere, anywhere to escape the tension, but Susan was prepared for this and kept me busy with her last minute requests to show her the fall of my gown and the way the trail glided along the floor with a graceful motion. Any moment the waltz would start . . . any moment . . . any . . .

Consuelo burst into the room, startling me and causing the bees in my stomach to take flight again. She looked me over critically and then gave her nod of approval to my costume. Her deep black eyes seemed to dance and glitter as she came close to me and held out a small package. I took it from her questioningly and opened the lid. It was the emerald necklace, of course; I had completely forgotten about it in all the excitement. I was too amazed to do anything but stare at the lustrous green magnificence before me, but Consuelo took it from my hands and placed it about my neck.

When Susan saw the necklace in place, she gasped as if doubting her senses. "Gracious! I thought that you were perfect before, but now . . . there aren't any words to describe how you look. I've never seen anyone so beautiful before in my whole life. Oh Beth, you're lovelier than a queen." She burst into a flood of happy tears as she embraced me. She was so happy for me—happy at what she was certain was to be my triumph.

Consuelo watched us both for an instant, her face mirroring some inner triumph of her own and bringing a chill to my heart. Behind her smile, her eyes burnt like the coals of hell. Something was giving her cruel satisfaction, banking the fires of her fury, but before I had a chance to comprehend the meaning of her warped pleasure, the orchestra began the opening waltz. Susan propelled me from the room. As we reached the top of the stairs, she kissed me on the cheek and started me on the descent.

There seemed to be hundreds of faces looking up at me, although I knew there were less. With each descending step, my heart skipped a beat. I could feel eyes boring in at me, weighing me against others in the room, and I uttered a silent prayer for the courage and composure to look my best for my father's sake. I could see him now, with his back turned halfway. I forced myself to keep an even pace so that my nervousness would not disgrace him. Only a few steps more and he would turn and take my arm. Only a few more steps . . . a few more . . . there! I had made it!

With the audience cueing him, my father turned around slowly and faced me. The smile vanished from his face and was replaced by uncontrollable rage. He staggered towards me, his lips forming unmentionable curses, then reached me and slapped me across the face with an ineffectual blow. But the shock of his transformation riveted me to the spot. The guests below cried out, but my father's voice drowned out their exclamations and silenced them.

"You haven't changed! You had to wear *his* gift in front of all my friends; you had to throw *him* up in my face." There was madness in his voice as he spoke to a woman who had died twenty years before—*my mother!*

Are you satisfied now, or must I grovel beneath your feet? This is your crowning triumph, madame, but without these . . ." He reached out his hand and took hold of the necklace. ". . . you're nothing!" With one pull he yanked the necklace from my throat and threw it to the floor, then spun on his heel and stumbled up the stairs, sobbing as he disappeared.

I stood frozen in place, unable to clear my ears of his ringing denunciation. This couldn't be happening. It was all some horrible nightmare. When I awoke it would flee to its vile hole, killed by the light of morning. It couldn't be true! But in a corner of my heart, I knew that it *was* taking place and that this was a waking horror, more terrible than the phantoms of night.

The guests were also welded in place by the enormity of what they beheld, but soon they would recover and I should be spotlighted on the stairs, stared at by the curious, laughed at by the insensitive mob. I had to fly, before they realized I was gone, and that impulse drove me down the stairs, through the crowd and into the dining room. Thank God, there was no one there!

I stopped for an instant to catch my breath. I heard them muttering in the other room, but I was too emotionally exhausted to care any further what they thought of me. I glanced around the room to get my bearings. Suddenly, I became aware of something wrong in this room. My eyes refused to credit what they beheld. The wall on the far side of the dining room table was split apart and Consuelo was entering the breach, a candle illuminating her way.

Consuelo! She had given me the necklace, knowing what it would do to my father when he saw it around my throat. She had known all the while how closely I resembled my mother, and she had planned her revenge

carefully, adding coal by coal to the inferno that had smoldered all these years. It was all clear to me. She had hated me from the first day I arrived and this was her moment of absolute glory. My father had disgraced himself and from then on would be forced to remain a recluse in Haelstrom Manor, under her power. He would never believe that I didn't know what I was doing. She would see that he didn't. I was helpless, unless I could force her to tell him the truth. It was the only way.

Before I fully realized what I was doing, I was through the open wall and following the flickering glow of Consuelo's candle as she paced rapidly through the passage. Black as pitch as the passage was, I could discern other tunnels branching off from this one and I understood now who had tried to kill me that first night. It was Consuelo. She knew her way about these hidden passages. It had been easy for her to enter my bedroom and attempt her mischief. *She* was the hidden watcher whose hatred had penetrated the walls. *She* had watched Bridget and me from my window. *She*.

I followed the glow of her candle carefully, lest I alert her to my presence. As she moved forward, I began fitting the missing pieces into place. My father's rage and other unnatural behavior were caused by the drugs she had been feeding him and I doubted that he was even aware of her duplicity. Bridget had told me that she had seen Consuelo putting the drug in his coffee, and after remembering what Dr. Blodget had said, I realized that she had purposely given him overdoses—enough to kill him when she decided that it was time. Dr. Blodget would refuse to come to the manor and would believe my father's untimely death was caused by his own carelessness. That was her plan, I was certain. But why did she risk

killing Bridget? I didn't know how she had managed Bridget's death, but I was positive she was responsible.

The passage was narrowing and sloping downward ever so slightly. I followed closer, not wanting to lose her from sight. Then the passage ended abruptly and I came close to falling head over heels down a steep staircase which was cut into the rock itself. I put out my arms and touched either side of the wall as I descended into absolute darkness. The candle's light was no longer visible, but I continued my pursuit, guiding myself by instinct.

I had no definite idea of how far down we were by now, but I could sense that we must be deep within the bowels of the mountain, perhaps almost to the beach. The beach! I paused for a moment and tried to separate the facts of what I had actually seen from the fiction that was building in my tortured mind. We must be almost on the level of the beach. That's how she had managed to murder poor Bridget! She had pushed Bridget from the cliff and then made her way down these stairs in time to throw off suspicion. There had to be a secret channel to the beach! I knew that I should soon find it if I continued my descent. Also explained was how Pedro was able to spy on Bill and me when we had picnicked by the river. Pedro also knew the secrets of the manor; perhaps he had even shown them to her.

The passage came to an abrupt end and I bumped my head against a stone wall. But it wasn't stone. It was iron—this was the door that led onto the beach. I could hear the sounds of the river through its massive grating. But it was barred from the inside. Where had Consuelo disappeared? She *couldn't* have gone through the door. I closed my eyes tightly for an instant to get accustomed to the darkness and then I tried to find the answer to this latest puzzle. Unless my eyes were deceiving me, there

was a further flight of stairs at right angles to the iron door. But if that were so, this flight led below the level of the river. Was it possible? I cautiously descended, step by step, until I was certain that there was indeed a last flight to walk down. I had to be exceptionally careful, because the stone was wet and slippery. I came to the end of the stairs and could feel broad flooring under me once again. I was in a much larger tunnel now, but the thought of being far under the surface of the river was terrifying and made me choke for breath. I couldn't control my fear. Bill's warning flashed through my mind as I walked along the path and my own stupidity at disobeying his orders came clearly to mind. I was in an unknown tunnel beneath the Hudson River, and somewhere up ahead was a murderess. I wanted to turn and flee, but I knew that I should never be able to manage. I had been guided by the faint glow of her candle; without it I was helpless. Why hadn't I listened to Bill?

My slow steps came to a halt as I beheld where the light was coming from. There seemed to be a large trap door in the flooring, through which the candle flickered. I moved carefully and looked downward into the gaping chamber. An ancient rusted ladder led into it. A candle's warm glow speared the ceiling above. If I were to continue tracking Consuelo, I would have to climb down the ladder. Although fear iced my heart, I put my foot on the first step and followed the rungs down to the bottom. On my last step, I felt my foot touch something soft and yielding. It was a body! I looked straight down and my heart stopped. Below me lay Pedro, his eyes wide and unblinking, a silver-handled knife sticking out of his chest. I tried to withdraw my foot, but no longer had the strength to make demands upon my body and the effort cost me my grip on the ladder's rungs. I felt myself

slipping and the next thing I knew, I was on the ground next to Pedro's corpse, with my eyes focused on a sight of absolute horror.

Consuelo was standing next to the trap door above me and in her eyes I read her intention. I too was to die.

"You will forgive Pedro's bad manners, but I did tell you that if he misbehaved he would lose his position, no?" Her mouth set into a cruel sneer as she enjoyed her own warped sense of humor. "You must have many questions. I feel the desire to answer them while you yet have time to ask. Did you not wonder why this chamber is under the river? The room you are trapped in was built to store the fort's gunpowder. The builders thought it wise to be able to flood such a chamber in case of fire—flood it by turning a wheel in the corridor above." She was savoring each instant. "The wheel I turned when you visited Pedro a few seconds ago, but you will soon notice that for yourself. You are going to die. But until the room fills up, I will answer your questions. That is, if you still have the courage to ask them."

"Why did you kill Bridget and why do you want to kill me? I've never done anything to hurt you." There was terror in my voice, terror in my heart.

"I do not hate you, little one, but you're an obstacle to what I want. Therefore you must be disposed of. The Irish one deserved to die, but when I pushed her from the cliff, I thought it was you. She was wearing your blue velvet cloak. She paid with her life for your kindness." Consuelo paused to savor the pain she had just caused me. "You have to die or else when your fine father dies, you would inherit his entire fortune, the fortune that I schemed for all these years. You look surprised. Your father would put me in his will as his wife, but you see, I am not his wife and never have been. It was so simple.

All I had to do was to give him drugs and then tell him that we were married—he believed it completely. He is stupid. He still thinks that I saved his life at the cost of my father's . . . so stupid." She suddenly started laughing hysterically and I knew then that she was the one who was insane, not my poor drugged father.

I could now feel the icy touch of the water as it flowed into the chamber and I knew that my one hope was to keep her talking, in the chance that she would leave the trap door open when she left. "But my father killed Don Alverez, your father, with a pistol you gave him. He told me that himself."

"Yes, he killed Don Alverez, but Don Alverez wasn't my father, he was what you call a patron, a protector. The pig, he was going to throw me out into the streets and so I traded his life for your father's fortune. A good trade, no?" Her laughter increased in pitch. "Do you think I would inherit the money when your lawyers probed the will? No, they would throw Consuelo out into the gutter. But Consuelo does not like the gutter. She likes fine dresses and pretty jewels and she will have them tonight." Her banshee laughter was suddenly replaced by a look of unearthly hatred. "Pedro thought he could make me give him money, because he knew the whole truth, but as you can see, all he got was a little silver. You will not be so fortunate. You will drown slowly, the air choking from your lungs as you fight for one more breath. You will die painfully because you've already upset my plans, and when you are dead, you will be joined by your father in hell."

"You're going to murder him?" I cried in despair.

"No, after he has murdered you and Pedro, his tortured conscience will make him to jump off the cliff. You do not understand? It's so simple. All the people saw your

father slap you and curse you, so when your body is dragged out by the river, the people will say that he killed you in anger and then destroyed himself as punishment. As for Pedro, many people have heard your father threaten the hunchback. They will not ask too many questions about the tragic affair of the poor mad officer. It is a perfect plan. In a short time, it will all be over for both of you." She stared down at me hatefully. "You may scream if you wish. No one will hear you through the mountain and no one else knows the passages. *Vaya con Dios*, Elizabeth. Now I must leave you to attend to your father. He's waiting for me by the cliff. He believes that I will tell him who killed Bridget. He's right, but he'll never know that. Goodbye and good luck."

I screamed at her, trying to hold her attention, but she only laughed again. The heavy iron door closed with a final deadly clang and moments later I could hear her securing the bolt. I knew there was no chance of opening it from the inside, but I couldn't just remain on the ground and wait for death to silence my hopes. I climbed the slippery ladder and tried again and again to force the door up with my shoulders. It didn't budge an inch. I was trapped and there was no way out.

A helpless despair gripped my heart. As I felt the water rising, my mind turned to the happiness that I could have known with Bill. If only I had listened to him, I would not be here, and my poor father would not be waiting for death to push him over the cliff. If was my disregard for what Bill had made me promise that would be the cause of our deaths. How stupid I had been. If only I had another chance!

The water was almost up to my chin now, although I had climbed to the highest rung. Within minutes, I would be dead. There was no hope . . . no hope . . . no . . .

"Darling, speak to me! For the love of God, speak to me! You've got to fight, my dearest. Fight to come back to me, fight for life. Please, my dearest, there's no life for me without you . . . you've got to come back to me. Try! Try!"

It was Bill's voice, but it was coming from so very far away and it faded . . . faded . . . faded . . .

"Elizabeth, don't leave me, my dearest, please don't leave me. I need you, Beth, need your love. Don't give up, Beth. Fight . . . try to speak . . . you can if you want to . . . please try."

It was Bill, I could hear him now. It was Bill. I screamed with all my might, but the most I could manage was a harsh croak. My throat was on fire, but I kept trying to reach my beloved. "Bill . . . I hear you . . . Bill!"

"Thank God we were in time." I could hear the gentle weariness in his voice as he spoke to someone else in the room. "She'll be all right now. All she needs is sleep and some warm blankets. She'll be fine." His voice now returned to me. "Darling, you're going to be all right now, but you've got to rest and gather your strength. I'll be right here by your side if you need me. Go to sleep, my darling."

I heard and understood him, but I had to warn my father before Consuelo carried out her lethal plan. "Bill, my father, you've got to warn him. Consuelo means to kill him, she told me that. You've got to stop her!"

"It's all right, darling. Everything is over with now. When you awaken I'll be right here by your side. Go to sleep and rest." His voice held a steady rhythm and I slipped back into merciful sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

IT'S ALL over now; they buried my father yesterday. I stood and watched them lower the casket into the earth and, as his body disappeared from sight, the sadness that had haunted Haelstrom Manor was finally interred. The funeral was a simple one, with only the staff and my few friends attending. It was the way he would have wished it. The one memory that gave me courage was that my father had loved me beyond all else. This I knew to be true, because, when I recovered consciousness, they told me the whole story.

The last thing I remembered was the water climbing over my head. Seconds after I had passed into darkness, Bill and Torder managed to open the trap door and pull me out. A minute later and they would have been too late to revive me; Consuelo would have accomplished her fiendish act. Susan's quick thinking had prevented that from happening. She'd seen me run into the dining room and had followed just in time to see me enter the hidden passageway. She would have followed me into the darkness, but before she could reach the panel, the door had closed and she was unable to locate the device to open it. Sensing my danger, she tried to get help from the assembled guests, but they were far too involved in their own confusion to pay her any mind. She was desperate. When Bill and Torder arrived, she related what she had seen.

Bill and Torder had gone to Albany to check the builder's records of the original fortification, which formed the foundations of Helstrom Manor, because they had reached the same conclusion about Bridget's death. They were certain a secret passage ran from the manor to the base of the cliff, because Consuelo had appeared on the beach immediately after Bridget's fall and they were absolutely sure that Consuelo was the killer. Bill's interest in old castles had helped. When I had seen him tracing a design on the wall, he was actually trying to discover the joining ledges of the hidden panel. Bill told Torder his theory and their trip to Albany confirmed it. They were able to locate the plans in a private library. The plans detailed many such passages, including the one which reached from the manor to the beach below.

Susan's frantic story convinced them that I was in deadly peril and they raced to my rescue. Their fears were increased by other pieces of information Bill had gathered on his previous trip to town. He had seen Dr. Blodget and was able to cajole the truth from the frightened little man. Dr. Blodget admitted that my father's condition was caused by massive overdoses of opiates and that the attacks were steadily increasing in seriousness. This information, plus that gained from the builder's plans, told them how Consuelo had managed to vent her wrath on all of us.

They managed to reach me in time, although for a while it was questionable whether I would survive, but they were too late to save my father's life.

When she met him on the cliff, he'd realized, at last, that Consuelo had indeed murdered Bridget and he suspected that I was the target of her rage. Knowing of his imminent death and fearful that unless stopped she would

destroy me, he threw his arms about Consuelo in a fatal embrace and plunged off the cliff with her. To protect me, he gave his life. We found a letter explaining what he intended to do, but I burned it after reading his last words, because his bravery and courage are better left unsullied by scandal. The coroner listed their deaths as accidental and Pedro's as suicide, which cleared my father's name of any misconduct. My father was a gentleman, but he had had the strength of character to fight for what he knew to be right. He'd loved me with all his heart and soul and I would always remember that whenever I thought about the tragedy that had befallen us.

I'm going home now, home to Vermont, and Bill is going with me. He's taking over Dr. Andrews' practice and he's asked me to be his wife when I've recovered from the shocks that still hold my heart from happiness. Time should heal the sorrowful wounds. Bill will be by my side to help me put the past to rest. Susan has also promised to visit us soon, as has Mr. Torder, and I look forward to spending many happy hours with them. Perhaps they will serve as our best man and maid of honor?

The house will be left to the crows as my father wished. Someday it will crumble and fall into the river, and nature's green carpet will erase the scar of its festered wound. Perhaps, one day, the land will bring forth beauty to replace the terror and soul-destroying memory of Haelstrom Manor.

STRANGE REUNION:

"Your father is alive."

These words should have come as welcome news, but to Beth Halsley they came as one more heart-wrenching blow... that meant her life would never again be the same.

To be reunited with her father was a peculiarly mixed blessing... for, at the ominous Haelstrom Manor answers were hard to find—and her father seemed to be hiding a mysterious and deadly secret that could incriminate them both... for life!

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